Our Wills and Fates

The Politics of Identity in Contemporary American Fiction and Film

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Introduction

> *God has created nights well populated with dreams, crowded with mirror images, so that man may feel that he is nothing more than vain reflection. That's what frightens us.*
>
> - Jorge Luis Borges, "Mirrors"

As concerned with concepts of identity as contemporary western cultures are, it is no surprise how prolifically we produce fictional depictions of what identity means to us. Questions arise as to how we define it, how it is constructed or springs forth, how we defend it, and how our contemporary experiences constantly demand shifts in our perspective on identity. In the current volume, we will consider framings of identity through a variety of fictional narratives that are in some capacity representative of contemporary popular American culture.[1] In reading contemporary film and literature, I make the assumption that the narratives we tell are of a reflexive nature: they tell us about ourselves, reflecting our desires and fears, which are always part of our desires, though in their telling, also fortify and/or otherwise manipulate our desires and lives - the telling of narratives as a symbolic, 'constitutive' act. To put it another way, this analysis makes the *a priori* assumption that we consist of the narratives we tell and, further, that when we reread them, they will always tell us something 'more' about our selves, our social climate, and about identity. The supposition accompanying my choice of narratives is that in considering a variety of popular narratives concerned with identity, patterns will emerge that will provide a reflection of where we are collectively most concerned with questions of identity; that is, of what troubles us most in contemporary notions of identity and subject formation.[2]

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[1] Although I will often refer to 'American' culture, the term is employed in specific reference to the United States and its cultural exportation. My reason for doing this is that the term is more representative of a vast set of ideas and ideals than it is of a specific topographical location and, in so being, already implies a fantasmatic space, a condition that will play a key role in my argument.

[2] As this will primarily be a psychoanalytical reading of identity and subjectivity in popular culture, I should point out that the use of certain (mostly Lacanian) psychoanalytic terms, such as 'symbolic' (with which I always intend the Lacanian order of the symbolic), may not consistently mean one thing, but have a variety of related applications (symbolic: the way language functions, the nature of social interaction, the law, the location of subjectivity, and so forth) which should become discernable though their context, and decreasingly ambiguous (to the extent that this is desirable) through the repetition of use, though I will also try to clarify some of the more problematic terminology to be employed as it occurs.

Against the backdrop of Lacanian psychoanalysis, specifically the orders of the symbolic and the imaginary, we will address the central concerns of authenticity and agency as they are related to identity. The trajectory of my argument aims at the place where the contemporary subject should find itself; or, where the individual should properly find his and her way into subjectivity. The starting point and bulk of this trajectory lay with the individual as depicted with overwhelming regularity in crisis; a crisis which often manifests as a concern for authenticity, and which will be read with regard to the 'relationship' between the individual or subject and the Lacanian big Other. By focusing on points of crises, we will be able to tease out locations and 'trouble spots' of subject formation that are of particular concern to the cultural milieu for and by whom these narratives are written.

The initial chapter, focusing on cyborgia and artificial being narratives, lays out some of the theoretical framework we will be using, and, through exposing a fallacy in authenticity, establishes a basis from which we can consider depictions of identity in crisis, while the subsequent chapters take the destabilization of authenticity as the given - the impetus for crisis. A large portion of this book, however, focuses on conspiracy narratives. The reason for this is twofold. It is here that we will flesh out our theoretical framework and theses concerning a crisis in subjectivity. Secondly, the central premise of conspiracy - that the 'state of things' is *not* based in contingency, but rather in the premeditated intentions of a quasi-omnipotent and omniscient agency - flows over into so many other contemporary narrative types and seems, to my thinking, to reflect our (cultural) tendency to attach individual and willed cause-factors to historical events. That is, the way in which we process information concerning the world around us and how it comes to be what it is, seems, at turn of the century late capitalist culture, to reflect central elements of conspiratorial thinking. Whether the assumptions that nourish this tendency are accurate or not is unimportant. What is of interest here is what this tendency exposes concerning the fears and desires of the culture the present study focuses on. Characteristic of this would be fear of the big Other as something that, to the one extreme, determines who we are *against* '*our wills*' ("they" or "the system" or "the man"), and to the other extreme, as something that is missing, leaving us in an identificatory void (the lack of Father/Law and mOther/Authority). In conspiracy thinking, we can see how

the former, fear of an omnipotent oppressive Other, is symptomatic of fear of the later, the lack of an organizing principle (Other) which guides identity via Law and Authority/Authorship. For example, it seems that we can no longer read Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* without raising the question that if it is possible that nothing exists outside my mind (fear of missing Other), that through a deception of the senses one has simply dreamt everything up, then why is it not possible that I am simply a projection (a fantasy) in someone else's (God's) dream (fear of the Other)?[3] This is precisely what is at stake in narratives such as *Blade Runner*, *The 13th Floor*, *eXistenZ*, *A.I.*, and with authors such as Philip K. Dick and William Gibson.[4]

In the section on aliens, as a step from conspiracy toward mysticism, will consider how certain traditional defining narratives, specifically mystico-religious ones, are recapitulated in the service of an attempt to anchor vanishing codes for identity in the face of culturally shifting ideologies. Where conspiracy narratives expose a general anxiety about the individual's relation to the Other (about subjectivity), alien narratives also expose anxiety concerning subjectivity and identity, though specifically in relation to religion or mysticism as a cultural location of identity production/support, a location or representative of (social) Other desire. We might read this in conjunction with what Freud says in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* about the psychological uses of religion and religious narratives insofar as they 'shield' the individual's various neuroses and help to prevent an indulgence in a pathologic adherence to the imaginary:

> Even those who do not regret the disappearance of religious illusions from the civilized world of today will admit that so long as they were in force they offered those who were bound by them the most powerful protection against the danger of neurosis. Nor is it hard to discern that all the ties that bind people to mystico-religious or philosico-religious sects and communities are expression of crooked cures of all kinds of neuroses... If he is left to himself, a neurotic is obliged to replace by his own symptom formations the great group formations from which he is excluded. He creates his own world of imagination for himself, his own

[3] This idea is present in such suggestive passages as the following: "By the word 'God' I understand a substance that is infinite, <eternal, immutable,> independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else (*if anything else there be*) that exists" (*Meditations*, pp. 31, italics mine).

[4] Another example of how the conspiratorial has 'crept' into our everyday thinking can be seen in the (patently American) tendency to believe that the more obscure or occult knowledge is, the greater its cultural value: take, for example, the recent trend in spiritualism, in which we see a heightened interest in Jewish mysticism (Kabala).

> religion, his own system of delusions, and thus recapitulates the institutions of humanity in a distorted way...[5]

What I would propose is that alien narratives reflect this desire to 'recapitulate the institutions of humanity', mystico-religious ones, in their tendency to recapitulate core components of Judeo-Christian mythology. Such narrative production is symptomatic of the "disappearance" referenced at the beginning of Freud's statement here. Relating this back to conspiracy, we might quite literally apply Freud's statement to the protagonist of the conspiracy narrative - s/he is a delusional paranoid - though this is not the extent of my intentions. We should rather read the prolific cultural production of conspiracy and alien narratives as telling us something about the subject of the society that produces, circulates, and consumes such narratives. I propose that conspiracy and alien narratives expose (through reflection and through evidence as symptom formation) a cultural tendency of adherence to imaginary relationships (to narratives, to individuals, to institutions, to social imperatives…) in such a manner that one's relation to the socio-symbolic becomes neglected.

Part four considers how this tendency can be historically and ideologically traced from the establishment of the colonies which would become the United States to what I will refer to as the legacy of the American Dream. Taking the Dream's core tenet of *reinvention*, we will look at the tendency for the contemporary subject or the individual to 'rewrite' its self precisely in terms of a rejection of certain interpellative machinery and an adherence to the imaginary; an attempt to 'reinvent' one's self according to fantasies that do not find a correlative in (the desire of) the socio-symbolic big Other. We will consider how such defining 'reinvention' narratives that are chosen by the individual are based on the volatile promise of the phantasmatic American Dream: despite your past, all things are possible for and accessible to you in your future. This cultural injunction, to reinvent oneself according to one's fantasy, will be read against specific notions of freedom and choice. As will be brought into focus in the section "Lacan's *Vel* and Determinism," and will remain a crucial point up through the conclusion, we will want to consider the socio-symbolic import of defining narratives and one's 'freedom' in relation to them.

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[5] Freud. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, pp. 74.

What the narratives to be read here have in common is their relation to crises in identity and subjectivity, and their depiction of individuals' status as subject (or non-subject) within the social-symbolic: they either involve a search for authenticity, for Law per an encounter (or a search for an encounter) with the big Other - be it through the alien, the ‘them’ of conspiracy, the 'creator' in artificial being narratives - or they exhibit an outright adherence to individual fantasy in what should be social-symbolic space. Though such scenes are, in a strict sense, less about the (im)possibility of encountering the Other 'per se', and more about the individual's or the subject's relation to the desire of the Other, we will see how these 'close encounters' necessarily involve a threat (often a matter of life and death) accompanying the individual’s relation and proximity to (the desire of) the Other, at which place a struggle ensues, resulting either in the birth of the subject, or symbolic death.

Though some narratives will be given a close reading, my main interest here is less to provide a few close readings of particular texts, and rather to provide a broader cultural reading of contemporary 'America' and the contemporary American subject through a variety of popular narratives. By drawing on a selection popular genres, I aim to provide 'cultural mirrorings'. After drafting a cultural tradition of adherence to imaginary space (in fiction, that is), consideration is given to how one might produce narratives and readings of narratives in a manner more 'responsible' to the social-symbolic and 'responsive' to the ever-shifting desire of the socio-cultural big Other, and, moreover, how such narrative production and interaction can be constitutive of a move *toward subjectivity*.

Part I. Cyborgia

What are the implications of the artificial for the human?

In contemporary popular culture, we have repeatedly seen narrative landscapes populated with androids and humans living, working, and struggling side by side with one another, and against one another, from *Star Wars* to *Alien*, and from *Terminator* to *The Matrix*. Why is this? Where have these androids come from and why do they so stridently assert themselves on the popular imagination with such an enduring and clearly provocative force? At (what we might term) the dawn of popular culture, films such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and, somewhat later, Fred Wilcox's *Forbidden Planet* (1956) brought the android into the locus of the public imagination.[6] While Lang's android acted as the medium for the ill intentions of the malevolent Dr. Rotwang, *Forbidden Planet*'s Robby the Robot and, almost ten years later, *Lost in Space*'s 'Robot' (he was never actually named) were both portrayed as autonomous entities with human characteristics that were primarily of a benevolent and beneficent nature. In thus framing the artificial being, the artificial was blatantly thrown into relief against the human.[7]

When asking, 'What are the implications of the artificial for the human?' the question necessarily breaks down into two preceding questions: the one being, "what is real?" or properly, "what is not real – artificial?" and "what is human?"

In most cyborg or artificial being narratives this question is explicitly posed and dealt with, though it would seem that the ubiquity of this theme and the lack of a resolution is due to the fact that in it remains an unresolved and perhaps irresolvable antagonism. Within the diegesis, what we often witness is a particular trouble with integration and identity: How or can the (hu)man-machine, the automaton, the artificial being fit into the human community? It may ask, "who am I?" or "what am I?" This subsequently turns the question back at us in the form of "what is human?" This is the point to which the

[6] The android's roots go much further back to the Greek legend of Talos, a bronze giant (robot) constructed for the protection of Crete's shores, and the Hebraic legend of the Golem in the Cabbalistic tradition.
[7] It should be noted that this was already clearly the case in the legend of the Golem, where the artificial being stood out as being in possession of what we generally consider to be positive human characteristics (honesty, faithfulness, even *joie de vivre*) against a partial backdrop of unsavoury human characters.

viewers, if not the characters in the narratives themselves, are forced to return: how do we define 'human'?

Proceeding from the assumption that these are questions of identity, I propose to look at how they are addressed in cyborg, android and artificial being narratives: Where is the domain in which the establishment of identity takes place and what are the processes involved? How do crises in identity develop? What are the consequences? In addressing these questions, I hope to demonstrate not only the significance of these narrative types in popular culture, but how they reflect typical contemporary identity crises. As a mirror of contemporary crises in identity, these cyborg simulacra return to kill their creator not in order to assume the position of a fully empowered subject or to re-place the father, but in what appears to be a gesture of desperation for not being provided with a proper ideological/symbolic social position, for being denied (singular) subjectivity. As Jean Baudrillard has said in reference to the clone "doing away with his 'father':" it will do so "not in order to sleep with his mother (something which is now impossible), but so as to recover his status as original and his exclusive identity."[8] We will focus on four narratives: Stephen Spielberg's *Artificial Intelligence*, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*.[9]

As is often the case in these narratives, the director/author presents the story in a manner intended to align our sympathies with the artificial being. This is an essential device in achieving a portrait of identity in crisis and particularly in blurring the boarders of the human and the artificial, which further works in the service of formulating questions about the nature and origins of identity: do we view identity, first of all, as a construct? If so, do we consider the processes involved to be *natural* or *artificial*? If natural, what does this say about the acquisition of identity where these artificial beings are concerned? If artificial, what does it say about acquisition of identity concerning 'natural' beings? *How and can we read a difference in the quality of identity between*

[8] *Screened Out,* p.201. It should be noted that we needn't read 'sleep with the mother' literally, but rather metaphorically, meaning in order to replace the father and assume a position of privileged enjoyment and authority (as in law, not authorship).

[9] *AI* is based on the Brian Aldiss short story "Supertoys Last All Summer Long" and conceived of in filmic form by Stanly Kubrick; *Blade Runner* is an adaptation of a P.K. Dick book with the original title of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*; *2001* was inspired by Arthur C. Clarke's *The Sentinel*.

natural and artificial beings in these narratives? And so on. If we are to understand the processes involved in the production of identity in Althusserian terms, then we know that this is an ongoing process that extends beyond the limits of the physical individual in both directions (before birth and after death), and that it is a constructive (constitutive) process in the sense that it continually (re)constitutes the subject. Returning to the question of a difference in the quality of identity between the natural and artificial being, we are on unstable ground from the start where identity is concerned. Note that if we replace the word 'being' with 'subject', the distinction becomes much more problematic. How do we determine what is an artificial subject and what a natural one? Again following Althusser, identity is a social (or socio-ideological) process, whether public or private, of construction – a social production. I preliminarily pose the question here: *to which category might we be more inclined to assign a construction of social production, the natural or the artificial*? This is a point to which I will return later. For now, let's begin by establishing antagonisms between the 'authentic' and the artificial.

The (hu)Man Machine: Complications with Interpellation

IMPRINTING PROTOCAL
CAUTION:
Please remember that this
Program, once activated,
is permanent, indelible,
and unalterable.[10]

In Steven Spielberg's *AI*, a young couple must come to terms with the loss of their child. They should be in the process of mourning, we are informed, though the child is still alive. While visiting their son, who is in a coma and being cryogenically kept in a state of suspended animation, a doctor explains that after five years of this condition, the parents instincts instruct them to mourn. He goes on to explain that, though the child may be lost, there is hope for the well being of the mother. Shortly after, the husband brings

[10] Steven Spielberg, *AI*.

home a 'Mecha'-child; that is, a mechanical child or, rather, a cyborg.[11] The scene opens with the mother (Frances O'Connor) waiting in front of an elevator, from which the husband (Sam Robards) emerges. It is their home. The dialogue that ensues between them is notably awkward: Monica utters his name, "Henry," and Henry's response is, "don't kill me. I love you. Don't kill me."[12] The cyborg boy is intended as an emotional crutch, so to speak, functioning as an *Ersatzkind* for the mother. We realize by this point that we are dealing with a narrative about the familial symbolic network and positions within it; that is, with identity. The cyborg, David (Haley Joel Osment), is not meant to replace the biological child *per se*, but rather to act as a stand in, to stand in the place of the symbolic position of the absent biological child for the time being. There will be much ado about this position, this space, and who fills it, for the remainder of the narrative. Shortly after this scene, the husband tells Monica about the process of 'imprinting' and the magnitude of their responsibility concerning the process. It irrevocably binds David to the person who imprints him by programming him with 'love' for this person.

The italicized text above the preceding paragraph is what is printed on the cover of the protocol pamphlet for David's so-called imprinting. Two days after the husband has 'delivered' David, Monica decides to keep him, to go through with the process of imprinting, and grant him the symbolic position that belonged to her biological son. The process entails holding the back of David's neck, and reading the following words in the following order: Cyrus, Socrates, particle, decibel, hurricane, dolphin, tulip, Monica, David, Monica. Now, it is clear that the most important words, according to our purpose, are the names at the end. We might read this scene jointly as a mirror scene, dictating who and what one is by reflecting off of an other and as a scene of initial interpellation. In either case, the result of the imprinting, of this mirroring, or initial interpellation, is

[11] Though there is some dispute concerning degrees of hybridity in relation to what might be considered 'cyborgian', there is general consensus that a cyborg is a hybridization of mechanic and organic; a cybernetic organism is "a mixture of technology and biology" (Chela Sandoval, from "New Sciences" in *The Cyborg Handbook*, ed. C.H. Gray), of "cybernetic device and organism" (Donna Haraway).

[12] I take special note of this here, the first introduction of the cyborg (into a human environment), because this is what the cyborgs often do in these narratives: they return to kill. And if they do not literally return to kill, they always return to kill the defining boarders of *human* and *authentic*. Additionally, as the cyborg in this narrative will hold the symbolic position of the son, and being that it is irrefutably a Oedipal narrative, the utterance is all the more suggestive.

that it establishes positions, relationships, within a symbolic network: it establishes identities. The dialogue that ensues gives emphasis to this point. After Monica calls David by his proper name – his name in relation to her – he mirrors the gesture and does the same in response: he calls her 'mommy', after which she asks, "what did you call me," and he repeats it, which prompts her to tellingly ask in response, "who am I David?" David tells her, "you're my mommy." Monica is immediately returned to the symbolic location of mother, as needed and loved by a son. From David's position, we might say that his relationship to Monica is closer to a natural or authentic mother/son relationship in that she does not act as a replacement. We also might go as far as to say that his love is more real than real, or rather hyper-real: it cannot essentially be altered.[13] In any case, what is clear at this point is that, through this scene of initial interpellation and subsequent scenes that reinforce their symbolic positions in relation to one another, David has been *irreversibly* called into the position of the son. With this clear, the biological son and the threat he caries with him must inevitably reenter the picture, and indeed soon does.[14] Before discussing the return of the son, though, a brief outline of Althusser's concept of interpellation is necessary.

In his 'notes' on ideology, socio-ideological structures, and subjectivity, moving from a necessary, though admittedly complicated, distinction between concrete individuals and concrete subjects, Louis Althusser defines interpellation as a hailing of the individual into subjectivity.[15] The locations at which this occurs and the agents involved are always already within ideology: ideological (state) apparatuses such as schools, family, religion, political parties, profession, and so forth, repeatedly hail the individual as subject; that is, locate the individual within the ideological (and symbolic) structure in her/his/its

[13] We might go as far as to link it to the Lacanian real, that which can't be symbolized, which is indelible in its state, whose symptom upon contact is trauma.

[14] The return of the biological son figures an essentially complex position into the matrix of positions: though we cannot properly call him the *objet petit a* (which is rather embodied in Monica), he does occupy a location of desire as well as the location *i(a)*, the location of specular otherness that is not true (or at all) alterity. At the same time, and to complicate matters, Martin is in the position representative of the Other (A) in its castrative capacity; if not more than Monica, more than the father, who initially does not seem to represent the Law here, nor does he seem to have agency until he finally assumes a castrative position and insists that David must depart. Nonetheless, it is Martin who is the real catalyst in this, and thus perpetuates the enactment of castration. Martin will be the agent that forbids David his desired object. This also moves toward an indication of a crisis in identity: *i(a)* and A occupy the same position; now, not only do we have the recognized otherness at the location of self, we have radical alterity at the location (or mirror location) of self (if, for the time being, we view the two in terms of authenticity).

[15] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)."

symbolic relation to other subjects. As Althusser makes clear, these are inextricable, circular terms: ideology and interpellation consist of and constitute each other. For the sake of clarity, he gives them a 'temporal form' in which to discuss them, though admitting that they do not properly exist within a temporal form (of order). We can think of this in terms of the use of names, titles, and such. On a rather elementary level, when one is called by one's name, 'Pat', and responds, both actions entail the acknowledgement of rich identification and history. The hailing person or structure locates the individual, identifies her/him, as, for example, Pat, son of *w*, works at *x*, believes in *y*, identifies with *z*. The individual hailed acknowledges that s/he is all of these things (or not, that there has been a mistake), all of the things enacted by her/himself in life, and all that s/he absorbs from others' projections of her/him, by recognizing the call and responding to it. Thus, a perpetual reestablishing/affirmation of position within the social-symbolic takes place, by which not only is the hailed subject located, but, by being located in relation to all the subtle and not so subtle conditions of the life surrounding – in a word, everything – interpellation functions in an omni-directional manner, situating all subjects. We will be concerned with interpellation and subjectivity insofar as they are essential to any idea of identity.

For the narratives discussed here, the social apparatus for interpellation of greatest concern will be the family. This is not due to any assumption that the family is the primary or initial location for an overall crisis in identification which I wish to address (though it is also not to discount this possibility), but, being one of the strongest locations of interpellative subjectivity, is chosen as the location at which this crisis is framed in the narratives we are concerned with (most clearly, at least, for *A.I.* and *Frankenstein*). *A.I.* serves as a good first example because it is most explicit concerning interpellation and troubled identity in direct connection to the institution of family. That said, let us move on to the moment when this potential for troubled identity becomes actual: the return of the double, the mirror reflection of discontent which marks the cracks in any illusion of wholeness and tears apart to expose irresolvable antagonisms and facilitate crisis. In David's desire for a perfect, that is, perfectly exclusive, mother-son relationship, there is literally one single requirement (in this case, he requires neither food nor sleep nor any other external element): the love of his mother, preferably absolute and uncompromised

by (the presence of) any other subjects.[16] The impossibility of this desire and its exposure as an impossible fantasy (as a fairytale) is precisely the terrain Spielberg's narrative traverses.

Miraculously resuscitated, Monica and Henry bring their biological son, Martin (Jake Thomas), home. They enter the house in a manner similar to David's initial entrance, and roles, positions, begin to vacillate and turn over. David, waiting at the elevator on the house's interior, is now situated in the position Monica was upon his arrival. It is now his symbolic position that will be altered. Monica, entering the house from the elevator and approaching David, is in the position Henry was in. She is the bearer of some important news about the introduction of a new element into this community, an element which will, once again, disrupt and alter. Martin, replete with synthetic (mechanical) hardware and systems which provide for his mobility, regulate his breathing, monitor his vital signs, and feed him the necessary drugs, has become a proper cyborg, a human mechanized, and is now in the position David, the machine humanized, held.[17] As a dramatic inversion of David's unassisted and uncanny entry into the house, Martin descends the staircase in a wheelchair. Monica approaches David, takes him by the shoulder and *turns* him twice: first slightly away from Martin and the nurse, so the frame captures only the two of them against the backdrop of a window, indicating both that we are at a decisive peripatetic moment in our narrative – a 'turning point' made literal – and framing a delineation of the (symbolic) location of this change (the home/family); then, she turns him back toward Martin and the camera pans across the room so they are foregrounded on top of Martin's position as she begins to explain, "the most wonderful thing in the world has happened." Monica backs away from David and, placing her hand now on Martin's shoulder, says, "this is Martin. This is my son." David's position once again becomes unclear and indeterminate, liminal. The similarities between the scene of David's original entrance into the home and this one clearly offset or encapsulate the narrative of his 'being home' in between. We are inclined to read the span of David's privileged presence in the house as a single chapter: within the diegesis, this is, on one level, David's phantasmatic terrain, the imaging of the protective fiction around which

[16] We know this by the wish he is granted at the end of the film. His sole wish is to have his mother back, to have a perfect day alone with her.
[17] David's (singular) interpellative process seems to have already granted him authenticity.

the narrative turns and to which in the end it returns. Programmed as he is to unalterably love his mother, he will refuse to accept castration and instead embarks on an epic journey in search of his prized object of desire, only to return, in the end, to an absolute state of fantasy.[18]

The scene following Martin's return opens with him crossing the room and picking up the supertoy, Teddy (voice, Jack Angel), by its ear. The first piece of dialogue we hear is the supertoy's (forbidding) words: "Martin, no." This sets the tone for Martin's (and ultimately the rest of the family's) treatment of David. From here, we can read the scenes that follow as illustrations of sibling rivalry, though the problem remains that they are not siblings. For that matter, we shouldn't forget, David is not even human. Where David seems to be vying for the attention of Monica, for her 'love', as he repeatedly indicates, Martin is seemingly secure in his position and we read his actions as malicious. He hasn't a reason to fear David, so he tortures him by making explicit that David couldn't possibly attain the relationship to Monica that he has.[19] This becomes increasingly explicit to David, whose position has been compromised by the return of the biological son and whose identity is destabilized by this return: he is not 'real' (though his love, indelibly programmed, hardwired, is), as Martin repeatedly points out to him. Concerning this anthropomorphic impasse, Georg Seesslen suggests that although "David is a child that parents could only wish for, as touching as he is intelligent, as well behaved as he is understanding, such perfect simulation still can't bridge the chasm between humans and mechas."[20]

Before moving on in the development of relationships in *A.I.* and extra-diegetic suggestion, I would like to briefly survey the episodes or elements of interpellation in the

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[18] We might also read this bookended story within the story as the phantasmatic space/narrative of the biological family in the film (an *everyfamily*) as well: the child in the coma is representative of a reality-pause at which the suspended child veils castration while traversing the fantasy of wholeness, played out with a representative stand-in, David, only to awake from the fantasy in a brutally altered state, physically debilitated (emerging from the fantasy properly castrated, or symbolized in the film, crippled from five years in a coma). However we choose to read this scene, we know we are due for a dramatic shift in the course of events and the locations within symbolic relations.

[19] Here again, we can read the narrative in terms of an unveiling of family fictions of wholeness in which, as his double, Martin is forced to drive out the phantasmatic figuration of himself that wishes to retain or refuses to renounce the mother: he must split himself and drive away (repress) this double.

[20] *Spielberg und seine Filme*, pp. 230: "Zunächst ist David ein Kind, wie es sich Eltern nur wünschen können. Ebenso anrührend wie intelligent, wohlerzogen wie verständig. Aber der Graben zwischen Menschen und Mechas ist nicht verschwunden durch die noch so perfekte Simulation."

other narratives to be discussed. While, within the remaining narratives, we perhaps do not find such a blatant framing of an interpellative moment/scene, the other narratives do 'comment' on the process.

In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the introduction of super-computer HAL9000 (voice, Douglas Rain) revolves around questions concerning its relation to the human crewmembers and their relations to HAL. In an earth to space craft interview by BBC news, HAL is questioned as to whether, despite his "enormous intellect," he is ever "frustrated by your dependence on people to carry out actions." To which he responds, "not in the slightest bit. I *enjoy* working with people. I have a *stimulating relationship* with doctor Poole and doctor Bowman. My mission responsibilities range over the entire operation of the ship, so I am constantly occupied. I am putting myself to the fullest possible use, which is all, *I think*, that any *conscious entity* can ever hope to do."[21] As Randy Rasmussen points out in *Stanley Kubrick: Seven Films Analyzed*, "…the words 'I enjoy' imply that emotion is indeed a factor in his [HAL's] perceptions" (pp. 79). The same can be said of the fact that HAL defines his relationship with the humans as "stimulating." When Dr. Poole (Gary Lockwood) is questioned as to what it's like to live and work in such close proximity to HAL, he responds that HAL is "just like a sixth member of the crew," and that you come to "think of him really just as an other person." Later, when Dr. Poole receives a video transmission from his parents on earth, wishing him a happy birthday, his reaction appears to be restive, he cannot respond to the parents, and he shows no clear signs of emotional response. It is worth noting that he never shows signs of emotional response. In *Stanley Kubrick und seine Filme*, Georg Seesslen points out that "…the human itself has become a mechanical being…"[22] This becomes meaningful when placed in contrast to HAL's humanness. Upon closing the transmission, HAL also wishes Dr. Poole a happy birthday, "Happy Birthday Frank," to which he responds, "thank you HAL." We later learn that HAL has the equivalent of a birth date (like inception dates in *Blade Runner*), and that shortly after his inception, he was taught

[21] Italics mine. With "I think," Descartes' superlative maxim should come to mind here, which is likewise explicitly used by the Replicant Pris (Daryl Hannah) in *Blade Runner*.
[22] Pp. 168. "…der Mensch selber ist ein maschinelles Wesen geworden…"This, as we will see in *Blade Runner*, *A.I.*, and *The Matrix*, becomes a central motif in the genre.

a song, which he will subsequently sing for us upon his termination. The gesture here seems intended to suggest parallels to the span of a life from childhood to mature adulthood,[23] the teaching of a songs being representative of an early act of social integration on a public scale: we probably all have (reconstructive) memories of learning nursery rhymes in kindergarten under the direction of an authoritative figure and in the company of other budding subjects. Also, HAL is a formidable though thoroughly polite chess opponent, engaging in leisure activities with the crew. He shows interest in Dr. Bowman's (Keir Dullea) artistic renditions of the ship's interior and asks "personal questions" based on his sensitivity to Bowman's behavior. Though all of these instances also serve to build HAL into a character that a viewer can potentially identify/sympathize with, or at least identify as a legitimate subject, what I wish to stress here is the interactivity between the crew and HAL, and that this interactive display of recognition contributes largely to identity/identification: These are illustrations of interpellative (I use the term here somewhat loosely to mean *identity* building) situations. As to the effect on the viewer of this type of framing, I will address this in the subsection "Sympathy and Identification."

Where the diegesis of *2001* follows a trajectory of interpellation with subsequent crisis, a violent rift between interpellator and individual/subject is assumed (following indication) as a given antecedent to the diegesis in *Blade Runner*. Nevertheless, questions in relation to and situations of interpellation are distinctly posed throughout the film. Within the first few sequences of the film, we learn that six replicants have escaped an off-world colony and made their way to Los Angeles. Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is a retired cop, a *Blade Runner*, who is called in by his former superior to 'retire' the escapee replicants. Deckard was known for exceptional ability in 'retiring' renegade replicants. As the name suggests, a replicant is an artificial being that appears to resemble 'authentic' humans in every way, similar to the 'mecha' of *A.I.* Also like in *A.I.*, and perhaps all of these films, the replicants were created to function in the service of humans. Replicants are used for off-world hard labor, military combat, leisure and

[23] A leitmotif throughout the film, from the 'birth of humankind' at the beginning and the galactic fetus (or atomic earth) at the film's close, to Dr. Bowman's witnessing of his own (rapid) aging/death and his subsequent transformation into this 'galactic fetus'.

entertainment, prostitution, and so forth. The replicants Deckard is to retire, the term used for killing them, are a recent development of the Tyrell corporation: the Nexus 6, the most advanced replicant to date. As we come to find out, these replicants are "designed to copy human beings in every way except their emotions. But the designers reckoned that after a few years, they might develop their own emotional responses… So they built in a fail-safe device." "Which is what?" asks Deckard. "Four year life span." From this point we can already guess the purpose of the replicants' mission to earth. In order to prepare for this particular job, Bryant (M. Emmet Walsh), Deckard's superior, sends him to the Tyrell corporation, where they have another Nexus 6 model. He is instructed to submit this model to the particular test, an "empathy test," that is generally used to identify a replicant from a human. Of course, Deckard's question to this is, "and if the machine doesn't work?" to which there is no response and we cut to the next scene. Once at the Tyrell Corporation, Deckard meets Rachel (Sean Young), who, though he does not yet know it, is the Nexus 6, and shortly after, meets Tyrell (Joe Turkel) himself. Tyrell requests that they do a test run of the empathy test on Rachel ("I want to see it work on a person. I want to see a negative before I provide you with a positive"), at the end of which, though it took far longer than normal, Deckard was able to identify Rachel as a replicant. Deckard also realizes that Rachel doesn't know she's a replicant. With this knowledge, he questions Tyrell: "How can it not know what it is?" Tyrell goes on to explain that they had recognized some problematic developments concerning emotions in these models and clarifies that by "gift[ing] them with a past, we create a pillow for their emotions and consequently we can control them better." What this consists of is implanting human memories into the replicants. These are usually memories associated with family and function as a replacement for actual historical interpellative experiences. The replicants feel more secure in their identity, so to speak, because they are able to locate themselves within a history of relations to other subjects whom they remember as holding important positions in these artificial personal histories. One of the opening scenes already establishes this as a central theme: when the replicants Leon (Brion James) is being subjected to an empathy test and is asked about his mother, he responds, "my mother? Let me tell you about my mother," at which point the replicant shoots the

examiner.[24] Later, we witness Rachel in crisis as she clings on to her family history (to Deckard, "you think I'm a replicant, don't you? Look, it's me with my mother," as she proffers a photograph), which she discovers belongs to someone else. Also notable is the use of names within the narrative. In many of the scenes, an introduction between characters is conspicuously framed toward the opening of the scene. There are simple introductions on the subject's own behalf ("I'm Rachel"), introductions between individuals by a third party ("Mr. Deckard, Dr. Eldon Tyrell"), requests ("What's your name?" "Voice print identification, your floor number please?"), greetings ("Evening J.F."), declaration, ("Leon!"), and so on. What stands out as particularly notable is the regularity of these episodes and of locating them at scene openings, a seemingly conscious framing of the name-calling process of interpellation in a narrative explicitly addressing problemed identity, authenticity in relation to identity, and identity creation.

With *Frankenstein*, we engage the diegesis from a starting point that is properly prior to the violent rift between interpellator and subject called, though there is something of a distinct difference between the early processes of interpellation in the book, where an initiating/initial interpellation is minimal, and the Branagh film, where there is a more thorough working of subject creation prior to the advent, the physical animation, of the monster. Whereas in the film much is made of particulars which lead Victor to his desire to reanimate a human, clearly starting with the death of his mother and extending onward fanatically from this basis, in the book there are only a few passages which address his desires in this respect and what his expectations are. The key passages are when he briefly speaks of quashing the potency of disease: "what glory would attend the discovery if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!" (p.26). And when he indulges in fantasies of being a god-like creator (an element common to these narrative types): "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing these reflections, I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might

[24] Similar to Frankenstein, mothers are either entirely lacking, or are associated with death. For a discussion of this in *Frankenstein*, see "The Lady is a Portrait" in Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body*.

in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption" (p.39). Indeed, these passages set what will become the monster within a referential symbolic framework prior to its physical advent, though attention to this (in the textual diegesis) seems somewhat minimal in terms of contributing to the process of identity. In the film, however, the narrative is much more thoroughgoing in terms of establishing Victor's purpose, which thus imbues the (potential) being he is to create with specific meaning.

While dining at the residence of Dr. Waldeman (John Cleese), Victor (Kenneth Branagh) discusses the contemporary potentials of medicine with his colleague Henry Clerval (Tom Hulce). He argues that sooner or later, the triumphs of medicinal sciences will be able to outsmart death. Here is where the reference to familial loss, the loss that finds its origin in the death of his mother (at the time he finds her dead, he cries, "bring her back, bring her back!" and in the next scene, "you never should have been allowed to die. No one should have to die," and swears that he will bring this change about), begins. Trying to convince Henry of morality's minor role in the matter, Victor asks whether he wouldn't give a healthy heart to a loved one with a sick heart had he the opportunity, and moreover, that this is, or is soon to be, a possibility. He argues that it can be done, that they are mere steps away, and that if one part of the human body can be replaced, then all parts can be replaced; that is, they will be able to design, to create a living being and that this being will, moreover, be impervious to sickness and old age, one of greater physical strength and intelligence, one that will be a better human. Soon after, Dr. Waldeman, Victor's mentor in Ingolstadt, is murdered by a peasant (like the monster, played by Robert De Niro) while administering vaccinations. As a result, Victor is able to acquire (by theft) the notes and journals of Dr. Waldeman, finding out that he had already, though unsatisfactorily, reanimated a dead man. Now in possession of these papers, Frankenstein is able to continue Dr. Waldeman's work. Trying to enlist Clerval in his service, he continues to use the argument that this work is necessary for the well being of society, that it is the key to conquering sickness and death.

In addition to the desire to rid the world of life threatening illness and to be able to, what turns out to be Lazarus-like, conquer death at other levels, the loss of his mother and fantastic desires of attaining a god like position of creation and subsequent worship guide

Victor in his undertakings and imbue his creation with meaning. The creation should represent great scientific and medicinal advances, revolutionary hope where there was none before, though if we look more closely, we recognize that these processes of interpellation have primarily been taking place in the mind and private world of Victor Frankenstein and have been associated at the very core with death and seclusion, with loss, with the abject. Thus, when the monster comes to life, it is rather fitting that these fantastic illusions of interpellation evaporate and those that have been more anchored in the 'real' (that is, in reality as opposed to his fantasy) – the warnings of Dr. Waldeman and Henry Clerval, the reality of the social and institutional unacceptability of his undertakings, the neglect of familial (filial and conjugal) responsibilities, the death of his mother, the disease ridden streets of Ingolstadt, the secretive excavations in graveyards and charnel houses; in short, the ever-presence of death – will come to light as the real interpellative machinery at work here and what will be enacted on the part of the father/creator will be an interpellation proper to these: one of loss, one of death, one of rejection; a negative interpellation in which one receives no name.

The Inverse of Interpellation

Up to now, we have discussed the 'positive' (constitutive) processes of interpellation present in the construction of identity of specific characters: the diegetic creation of subjects. The next point of consideration, and *Frankenstein* will serve nicely as the primary model, will be that of a refusal to interpellate, a rejection, an attempted abjection. In her discussion of the exchange of the locket containing Victor's mother's likeness and maternity's role in Shelley's narrative, Elisabeth Bronfen points out that "[f]or the monster this 'portrait of a most lovely woman' reflects his own 'castration', his exclusion from the 'delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow' and it is in response/relation to her image that he demands of Victor a feminine counterpart, even though the feminine monster is to be as 'deformed and horrible' as he, a monstrous parody of the 'beautiful dead mother,' an animated arrestation of his nightmare image of the decaying punctured maternal corpse" (*Over Her Dead Body*, p.135). I would like to

emphasize here that among these 'delights' to be bestowed from which he is clearly excluded, is that of subjectivity, or at least a mirroring which must aid in the development of subjectivity, either of which in any form are essentially dependent on the presence of the mOther. The monster desires (or lacks) a family, desires community, a symbolic framework through which he may know himself as subject within a matrix of subjectivity. With no mother, no wife, no family - only a (male) creator who will deny his creation subjectivity - the monster is framed in a null-matrix of total privation. This locket encases a literal representation of family, the core symbolic community that the monster lacks and of which he will deprive his creator until they are each left with only the company of the other, their own counter-parts, and each of whose identity will be purely constructed on the relation to the/this other. We should again note Bronfen here: "To exclude the feminine as natural difference results in a relationship where the creator is exclusively constituted by his creation such that it ultimately implodes and destroys itself" (p.132). Clearly there is no mother in any capacity for the monster: no location of culture and authority essential to the development of subjectivity, *and* no original object of desire. This also means that the structure upon which the Name-of-the-Father is based is missing, which is notable in all of these narratives: none of these potential subjects act according to the law, we might say, because of the lack of the Law. Without an original object of desire, there can be no prohibitive exclamation on the part of the symbolic father. Thus, no name can be conferred and no location within the symbolic. Outside of any relation to the Law and authority, our monster can communicate nothing other than an eruptive backlash of unchecked violence on the locations that *would* offer subjectivity, but instead only signify lack on all levels, showing him what he does not possess. He engages this lack accordingly.

From the moment of animation, Dr. Frankenstein refuses to interpellate the monster. That is, he refuses to grant identity to this corpus he has granted animation. He refuses even to look upon him, granting him no reflection (no mirroring) at all. This theme of seclusion/exclusion is made explicit from the start, when the explorer Walton writes from Archangel to his sister, "I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, *whose eyes would reply to mine*;" that there is "one want which I have never yet been able to satisfy, and the absence of the object of which I now feel as a most severe evil. I

have no friend, Margaret…I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve or amend my plans" (4-5). We might say, he has no location of mirroring elemental to subjectivity. Prior to and after this letter, Walton repeatedly speaks of dislocation from family, from friends, and from the land familiar to him. Later, it will be the monster who is cut off from anything of the like, and finally it will be Victor Frankenstein himself, literally located in a frozen desolate landscape with these other two forsaken of society. In addition to the absence of interpellation on the part of Victor, the monster must traverse other locations of interpellation, other symbolic communities which will likewise fling him from their midst. He is pursued out of the town of Ingolstadt by the authorities and crowds of people, and later he is chased from the home of the family whose shed he has been living in and for whom he has been secretly laboring. Thus, he is denied by his own creator, rejected by society at large, and at once thrust from (symbolic/*ersatz*) family and place of work: 'abjected' instead of 'subjected'.

In the other narratives considered here, there is likewise some form of negated interpellation. The forms this takes range from exclusion from (primary) interpellative communities (*Frankenstein*, *A.I.*) to denial (of life: *2001*, *Blade Runner*). As in *Frankenstein*, David in *A.I.* is expelled from his primary interpellative community, from his family, and refused the right to his name: the name of son. He is "a Pinocchio, descendant of so many human creations that are unable to become human, from Frankenstein…to the Terminator."[25] Or, let's say, from Golem, over Frankenstein, to HAL 9000. For the parents, he is "taken to be nothing more than a 'Super-Toy'."[26] That is, he is disposable. He will beg for his position, to be able to remain at the location within the symbolic, alone through which he can know himself, can be a proper subject, and thus in possession, in a manner of speaking, of his life. In *Blade Runner* and *2001*, this is framed somewhat more bluntly as a threat to physical life: human life (within a social context) equals subjectivity and subjectivity is constitutive of human life. When this is directly framed within the symbolic (*Frankenstein*, *AI*), there is a request: as

25 Seesslen, pp. 232: "ein Pinocchio,ein Nachfolger von so vielen Menschenerschoepfen, die Menschen nicht wurden können, von Frankenstein…bis zum Terminator." My translation.
[26] Seesslen, pp. 230. My translation.

mentioned above, David will beg not to be jettisoned from the constitutive constructs familiar to him; Frankenstein's monster will likewise return to demand family - a wife of his own. The replicants of *Blade Runner* return to the home with the request for "more life." What follows is a pure rejection, a refusal. David is denied his mother, Frankenstein's monster is denied his wife, the replicants are denied an extension of lifespan, and HAL is denied his existence.

In *2001*, when HAL predicts that a communications unit will malfunction and there is some speculation as to whether he may have made a mistake, the two crew members who are not in suspended animation ("hibernation") attempt to privately discuss what the consequences of a mistake on HAL's behalf might be. They go into a pod where HAL cannot hear them with the pretext of checking some equipment. Once inside, they determine that any malfunction on HAL's part must result in his disconnection, in termination. What they do not realize is that HAL is reading their lips through a portal window. Following this, in an act of self-preservation, HAL attempts to kill the entire five-member crew, succeeding with all but one. A struggle to the death ensues between Dr. Poole and HAL. As Seesslen suggests, "thus begins the struggle between man and machine, between two thought-systems [Denksystemen], that want nothing else but to survive one another."[27] I would like to look at this threat to life, or to life's stabilizing and constitutive factors, which results in death, through the scope of Kristeva's notion of abjection and Freud's uncanny.

Abject and/or other?

> *abjection works… as a means of separating out the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially constituted subject.*
> - Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*

For each of our narratives, we indeed have what appear to be fully constituted subjects, individuals already fully (functional) within the symbolic: they are either the

[27] *Stanley Kubrick und seine Filme*, pp. 171: "So beginnt der Kampf zwischen Mensch und Maschine, zwischen zwei Denksystemen, die nichts anders wollen als einander überleben." My translation.

progenitors, various potential agents of interpellation, or both. Creed's claim appears to be precisely what they attempt to perform. In each case, there is an attempt to separate the human from the non-human, which is at the same time an attempt to separate the fully constituted subject from those only partially constituted, whose (potential) subjectivity, we might say, is contingent upon the former. In addition to this, and in support of what is characteristically abject - that which must be jettisoned in service of the subject's survival - these fully constituted subjects attempt a separation in what seems for them to be precaution against violence to their own being. That is, this cutting away of what cleaves to them, their unnatural progeny, is enacted based on a perceived threat in these progeny. With the possible exception of *Frankenstein*,[28] this perceived threat is generally explicit and not difficult to identify: In *2001*, any mistake on the part of HAL 9000 would indicate his fallibility and, because "there isn't a single aspect of ship operations that's not under his control," would put the success of the mission and the safety of the crew's lives in question. In *Blade Runner*, we know that, having carried out "a bloody mutiny… in an Off-world colony, *Replicants* were declared illegal on earth – under penalty of death." Thus, the threat is a bodily threat of violence and a threat to order, though it is worth noting that another threat they pose is simple that of becoming *too human*: "They were designed to copy human beings in every way except their emotions. The designers reckoned that after a few years they might develop their *own emotional responses*: y' know, hate, love, fear, anger, envy. So they built in a fail-safe device… A four year life-span."[29] This initially works well in connection with the concept of the abject, according to the way in which we understand or experience it and it's functions. Barbara Creed tells us that robots and androids are portrayed as abject because they lack souls; and bodies without souls are equated to copses, signifying "one of the most basic forms of pollution" (*The Monstrous Feminine*, p.10). Thus, if in *Blade Runner* their essential difference from humans is their emotions (the lack of them), the development of emotions is precisely what would threaten. It would threaten boundaries between the human/the living and the

[28] One might argue that, though an attempted abjection of the monster begins to take place immediately at the time of its animation, various potential threats may already be read in it: the fact that it has been a means of exclusion from family and society, it's potential for the destabilization of established systems (including that of human breeding, which necessarily took place between a man and a woman; implicitly the institution of marriage, which is clearly at stake here), all that it's prior-to-life interpellation signifies (sickness, death, transgression…), and so forth.

[29] Sergeant Bryant, *Blade Runner*.

non-human/the abject, thus making any differentiation that defines 'human' problematic, if not impossible. This manner of ambiguity concerning the potential *humanness* of artificial beings, their potential for being endowed with a soul, or, as here, developing a soul (emotions), will be discussed later at greater length. In *A.I.*, an explicitly Oedipal narrative, the ideational element of threat is given particular attention.[30]

A.I. produces two different scenes (and several different threats) that explicitly frame *threat*: the first, when David, under Martin's advice and guidance, attempts to cut Monica's hair while she sleeps. This is written within the context of Oedipal anxieties of castration on various levels, with various framings of castration. We begin with an initial threat to the biological son: after having provoked David into damaging himself, we are presented with a scene in which David's uncanny otherness is explicitly posed. As two technicians operate on David while he lies with his innards exposed, Monica nervously looks on, holding his hand. David looks up at her and says, "it's okay mommy; it doesn't hurt." At this she gasps and falters somewhat, then quickly lets go of his hand and walks to a corner of the room confused and clearly disturbed. By underlining his otherness, her understanding of her feelings for him – that is, her understanding of their symbolic relations – becomes destabilized, putting into question certain conditions in relation to functions.[31] With this, Henry, the husband, approaches in what appears to be an attempt to comfort her. "Monica," he says, to which she reacts, "shh. I just have to…" She doesn't complete the sentence, but rather produces the ellipsis, half turns her head, sighs and half smiles in a gesture indicating that she has now understood something she foolishly hadn't up till that point. She understands the significance of her feelings, or rather of the symbolic relationship they (she and David) constitute and the insignificance in trying to classify difference at another level. She then walks back to David and securely takes up David's hand again, as his mother, as Martin looks on. Martin clearly and rightly perceives this as a threat to his enjoyment of the mother. This is our first framing of castration. Spielberg brings this into focus by overlapping the narrative of the following scene onto the image of Martin looking at his mother affectionately grasp the

[30] Daniela Janser has poignantly (if glibly) remarked that all (or most) Spielberg films are Oedipal narratives.

[31] That is to say, the conditions of his existence, of his being, and the conditions of their relationship do not correspond to their function or effect: conditions = close proximity to and exchange with what is not human; effect = maternal feelings.

hand of David: "Will you do something special for me?" Martin asks David, and then we make the visual shift to the next scene, in which he goes on to convince David to secretly enter the parental bedroom and approaching the mother with a large pair of shears. He assumes that sending David into the bedroom with this object that is itself a potential threat, meant either to pierce or cut, will result in the actual castration of this object (the removal of the shears), which, as the object stands in metaphorically for a part of David that mustn't enter the bedroom, would by extension be metonymous for the castration of the whole of David (would ultimately result in David's physical removal from the home/parental bedroom). Here is a second scene of castration: Martin, himself threatened with castration, attempts to precipitate David's being barred from mother (or, more exactly, the reverse: the mOther being barred from David). He does this by means of the third castration: fooling David into a position in which he will appear as a castrative threat to the father and to the mother. By entering the parental bedroom with the shears, and approaching the bed, we cannot but simultaneously read this gesture as a real castrative threat to the father and subsequently penetrative threat to the mother (the sheers frame a real physical castration, which we also read metaphorically). Thus, we have castrative threat at Martin, at David, and at the parents. Additionally, the intention is to cut off a lock of the mother's hair. Martin instructs David to "sneak into mommy's bedroom in the middle of the night and *chop it off*;" telling him that, as a result, she will love him more.[32] Though Martin, by inference, equates the possession of a lock of hair to the tradition of chivalric romance, we know his intentions follow an other tradition: because this lock is not being proffered in a gesture of love or devotion (or at all, for that matter), but rather taken in sleep, *chopped off*, we should rather read it in the tradition of castrative threat, examples of which are present and familiar from various eras of mythology and literature - Samson and Delilah, *The Rape of the Lock* - and other narrative types (dream/symbol analysis, psychoanalysis), the hair being another recognized symbol of vitality/potency/fertility.

[32] Notably, the camera shot of the two sons is set against the backdrop of their bedroom wall, on which hangs a painting of a mother holding her child. Also notable is that, in the sentence that articulates the command "chop it off," there is no antecedent to *it* (in fact the antecedent is found seven sentences and four 'it's earlier), leaving a certain suggestive ambiguity as to what should be lost here, or curtailed, and what gained.

The second scene of threat, which comes directly after the one previously discussed, does not display a threat toward the mother, but rather first makes explicit the threat enacted against the husband in the previous scene, and then substantially enacts a physical threat toward the biological son. Discussing the event in the bedroom at the poolside while preparing for Martin's birthday party, the husband is trying to convince Monica that they should get rid of David, claiming that he is a danger to the family. Monica equates the two boys to brothers and says of David, "he's practically human," to which the husband replies, "that's not how he looked holding the knife," meaning the shears, but clearly interpreting them in their penetratory capacity, which would symbolically suggests a threat to his position. Immediately after this is the birthday party, with the children playing at the pool. Gathered by the poolside, one malicious boy is explaining David's operational system to the others. He stabs David in the arm, at which point David hides behind Martin, only to drag him into the pool and not let him go until the fathers jump in and release him. After this, the husband insists that he be returned to Cybertronics, his place of manufacture. Thus, this second son, this other son, is jettisoned from the family body, an act justified in the end through a real physical threat, but clearly also due to the threat he presented to male subjectivity within this body, to the stability of these positions within the symbolic family network. As Kristeva tells us, it is that which "disturbs identity, system, order…[and] does not respect boarders, positions, rules" that causes abjection.[33]

The Apex of Abjection

> *The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death, which, in any case, kills me, interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science, among other things.*
>
> - Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

[33] From "The Powers of Horror" in *The Portable Kristeva*, pp. 232.

This is a central point around which *A.I.* is constructed. It is the means by which the film attempts to generate pathos and the reason the pathos is so excessive,[34] it is why the film wanders into an alternate genre in the end (fantasy fiction/alien genre),[35] why the film can only end as a fairytale/dream narrative. This, I would venture, is due to the difficulty of portraying the 'real' abjection of a child, particularly in a Spielberg film, where, although the many 'child' narratives he has produced address similar questions, the outcome is at the other end of the spectrum, depicting solution or triumph.[36]

Although in each of the films discussed here, the attempt at abjection takes place at the location of progeny, *A.I.* is the only one that presents this progeny as a youth, as a child. It frames precisely this equation of death interfering with what is "supposed to save me from death" - in this case, childhood. Still, this is just what the film dare not be too explicit about, death interfering with the child. On the one hand, we can read the travels of David as those of a prepubescent Odysseus: he must undertake this epic journey in order to find himself and his 'object of desire' (his Penelope) again. The

[34] Made most explicit in the scene where David is captured and taken to be publicly mutilated at the "Flesh Fair." Though he is a machine, the implicit taboo is too pronounced, in that he is a child, and the audience at the fair is moved to dissent.

[35] This can be read as a 'false ending': The film-narrative begins with an introductory monologue that explains the context of the tale we are about to be told; it clearly functions as a prologue. Later, once David has found out he is merely a reproduction among an infinite possibility of reproductions, and that he will not see his mother again, he attempts suicide, jumping off a skyscraper into the ocean. At the bottom of the ocean, he sees the Blue Fairy, who, according to legend – or Pinocchio – can turn him into a real boy. When his accomplice, Gigolo Joe – a male version of the Happy Hooker - comes to save him in an "amphibicopter," David explains that he has found the Blue Fairy and that he must return to her, which he promptly does in the copter. Some moments after positioning himself facing the Blue Fairy, who clearly represents the mother (made further explicit by a visual resemblance), a massive metal structure (we assume it is an old Ferris wheel) falls on top of the copter. When the sea-dust clears, we see the fairy from David's perspective, at which point there is a dramatic caesura in the music. It is the same image of the Blue Fairy as we saw from his perspective earlier, but now there is a giant metal girder running cross-wise in front of her: an actual imaging of the barred mOther. At this point, a rough one hour and fifty-five minutes into the film, the voiceover that read the prologue at the beginning of the film (Ben Kingsley) once again enters, breaking (into or off) the diegesis. It now explains that David sat in the copter for an age praying to the Blue Fairy, so long that everything shriveled up and died in the surrounding waters, that the waters eventually froze, and that David continued to look upon her and repeat his wish until "eventually, he never moved at all." We might read this as the proper end of our narrative, where the child dies: there is the a clear figuration of the barred mother, which means the end of David's fantasy and its trajectory, which has been the content of the film; there is a figuring of his death in that he freezes, becoming completely inert; and there is an epilogue. Still, perhaps due to the bleakness that such an ending would make explicit – a tale of the rejection and death of what we come to equate with a human boy - Spielberg does not end here, but rather returns to the boy's original fantasy – the sole possession of his mother.

[36] This is clearly a point of departure from later Spielberg narratives and is perhaps suggestive of what *A.I.* might have been as a Kubrick film, as it was a project originally conceived by Kubrick and passed on to Spielberg.

problem is what to do with this child at the end of the journey - we know he is already dead. We have the introduction of an alien narrative, which should somehow signify that all things are now possible, and finally a more decisive entrance into what is clearly an Oedipal dream narrative. The gesture is thus a turning away from the real horror of the logical consequences the earlier abandonment scene would affect: little boys are killed by their mothers out in the woods (another fairytale reference in this film - *Hanzel and Gretel*), what we might call an ultimate horror, the apex of abjection - and turns rather toward another horror: the dream scenario of wish fulfillment that we recognize as the Oedipal narrative, though consummate. The father and rival brother are not traceable in the domicile, non-existent, expunged, and the boy beds his sleepy, blurry-eyed mother. Impossible; we know the kind of tumult this act consequently requires.

A colleague of mine insists, perhaps somewhat exaggeratedly, that the abandonment scene in this film is one of the most harrowing in contemporary film fiction. If there is any truth to this, I would argue that it is so because of Kristeva's 'equation', which we could symbolize in the following manner: D→xL/C(-D)=+A; where D stands for *death*, →x for *to interfere with*, L/C for *life/childhood*, and +A for *the apex of abjection*. David, who has been interpellated by the mother and thus, as a vessel, is filled with the ideology (characteristic thinking or constituent characteristics) of his very 'childness' exactly in relation to his mother, is metaphorically taken to slaughter here in the abandonment scene, which is further inferred by its visualization in the following scene. The scene which follows, the "Flesh Fair" scene (the public slaughtering of cyborgs as entertainment, an explicit framing of abjection), should be mapped back onto the scene of abandonment, making blatant the meaning of the abandonment scene: he is trapped/tricked and forced into a position which will mean his "death," which does mean his death, though he is physically allowed a narrow escape which is equally meaningless because he is already (symbolically) dead - his purpose is hopeless, his identity/self is lost and his physical death is merely deferred to a point at which he must face this hopelessness and must then meet death. Nevertheless, up to the end of the film, this hopelessness and death is veiled in the fantasy at the core of an original and originary wish, of what constituted his identity/self: a reunion with and possession of his mother. Though he is given money and some not very hopeful advice at his moment of

abandonment, we are made aware that his survival in this external world, with no family, no identity, 'uninterpellated', is highly unlikely; indeed, with no family, no identity, and uninterpellated, we already know that he is, in a manner, beyond even the finality of death. We are presented with an ideational, purely fictive (that is to say, such a thing as uninterpellation would not exist outside a fictional model), vacuum-existence dichotomy; he is killed beyond death.[37] What adds to the disturbing quality of this scene is that it is the mother, his primary interpellator and his object of desire, who kills him. The more 'humane' thing to do would have been to return him to the Cybertronics corporation and let them deprogram him as a machine, rather than 'uninterpellating' him, ideological and identity death, as her human child. Though where the taboo of infanticide may have been disturbing in its own right, it seems to me that placing the mother in the position of agent in this act pushes it beyond merely disturbing to a point where it potentially folds back incredibly upon itself: Mother = Death; her interference with her child is his murder; Child = Life/Child = negative Death, and thus, Child equals negative mother. Here is where the equation seems to turn back on itself: We tell ourselves, 'child cannot equal negative mother' even as mOther in her castrative capacity, which would rather entail a shift from the imaginary to the symbolic: creation, not destruction, of the potential subject.[38] Following the equation thus [M/D→xL/C (-M/D)=+A], the mother abjects her own (negative) self and not what is *not* her or what will not be her in order that she may live. I will offer a possible solution for this a bit further on. Where separation from the mother would commonly be a function of a proper entry into the symbolic, here, this enactment of a separation from the mother can only result in death because this particular subject's entire subjectivity is rooted in its mother. That is, it is not fit for mature

[37] As noted earlier, interpellation extends in both directions beyond the physical existence of the subject/individual. As a subject begins to be written before its physical advent, so it remains a subject (albeit a different type of subject, a residual subject) in the memory of its survivors or, let's say, in the memory or the symbolic. If we can conceptualize this/these narrative event/s as uninterpellation, 'killed beyond death' would mean the revoking of subjectivity and, with it, residual subjectivity. We might say that, in these narratives, with the refusal of interpellation as an act of subject-murder, what would otherwise subsequently be residual subjectivity (memory-traces of the subject) turns into residual murder: there is the murder of the subject followed by the murder of those which killed the subject, but by the same token, these are also those which the subject has left behind. Thus, memory-traces become murder-traces.

[38] We might read this scene in terms of a moment of Lacanian *alienation*, at which the potential subject either submits to the mOther, thus relinquishing the imaginary and gaining subjectivity, or does not – as David does indeed not – thus foregoing subjectivity and clinging to the fantasy of the imaginary (psychosis/neurosis). At any rate, this would still not place child as negative mother nor mother as death.

subjectivity just as much as the characters from the other narratives are not because of the lack of mOther.

In the same way I read this scene of abandonment as abjection, I would read the implementation of the four-year life span for the Replicants of *Blade Runner*, as well as their 'retirement', basically as forms of abjection for the reasons states earlier. We can see how the central characteristics of abjection are present: they must be cut away because their position or what they represent is unclear in that they are me (human in most respects), but then again they are not me (not human, artificial, dead); they appear to me to be uncanny; there is a threat posed; borders become destabilized with their presence and should re-stabilize upon their excision, and so on. When we consider the attempts at abjecting Frankenstein's monster, we may say to ourselves, 'but the monster has murdered a child, and that is the reason', though we should recognize the refusals of interpellation at ideological-symbolic locations mentioned earlier also as a form of abjection: driven (cut away) from society in Ingolstadt, driven (cut away) from the family, and rejected by Victor, his creator/father. In *2001*, abjection is rather more potential at the time of reaction. That is, the two waking crewmembers recognize a potential threat that would result in HAL's abjection, though HAL, recognizing the threat of abjection to his own existence, turns the abject back onto those who would find it in him, and kills. Thus, in the face of death, that which would be abject returns to kill that which would abject. How can this happen? Before answering this, I would like to clarify some points in my use of Kristeva's abject.

I have obviously used 'abject' in terms of what one cuts away from oneself, potential death, in order to live. In this capacity, we may conceive of this act occurring on behalf and at the hand of mature subjects. We have established the (material) threat to these subjects and the location at which they consequently abject (or attempt to abject) the agent of threat (their progeny). Kristeva is also interested in Lacan's notion of language, alienation, subject creation, and the big Other. Where she discusses the abject relative to these, we at places come upon something of an inversion. Here, abjection takes place so that a new subject may come into being, as opposed to something enacted for the preservation of a mature subject. Two processes are possible in this respect: the

unformed, or rather partially formed subject rejects something, and in doing so saves itself from non-subjectivity, from psychosis, and propels itself into selfhood, into a world of demarcation; or, the fully formed subject causes demarcation by "making it [the potential subject, but then also itself] repugnant" (p.236) - "I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be 'me'" (p.237).[39] That is, when the big Other, what will direct myself as social entity (entity within the symbolic), functions, it implements itself as Law, forbidding, restricting, castratively delineating, and constitutively separating me, bringing a world of language into me and me into a world of language in whose grammar *I* will be a subject.

Earlier, I stated that the mother in *A.I.* "abjects her own (negative) self and not what is not her or what will not be her in order that she may live," and also that (in regard to HAL 9000) "in the face of death, that which would be abject returns to kill that which would abject." I will now propose a solution to these two problems, which are not so different at all. They are, in fact, complimentary perspectives of the same situation: abjection of the self - the self killed by what it has abjected. What I am concerned with here is how the attempt at abjection can backfire, in a sense, and turn into abjection of the self. That this happens in *2001*, I think, is clear. Let me briefly sketch how it comes to pass in the other narratives.

I have said that in *Blade Runner* there is a return of the progeny after some form of abjection or attempt at abjection (the four year life span and their attempted and, for the most part, successful 'retirement'). Upon this return, there is a request. The Replicant Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) meets his creator, Tyrell (Joe Turkel), who asks him, "what seems to be the problem?" to which Batty answers, "Death." He then continues with his request: "I want more life, fucker." And again, there is a refusal, what I would like to label a second attempt at abjection, though this second and final abjection also means Tyrell's own death. Batty takes the head of his progenitor in his own hands, kisses him on the mouth, and proceeds to crush his skull and push in his eyes. Not long after, the progeny Batty will also die. In the other narratives, this functions somewhat differently, but functions nonetheless. In *Frankenstein*, following an initial abjection (and an initial

[39] We should think of this here in terms of Lacanian alienation.

death), the monster returns with the request for a wife. We have already discussed how this is also a request for life in that what the monster seeks (as did our narrator in the beginning of the story) are the social structures within and upon which to establish subjectivity. With no relations whatever, the monster is in effect non-existent. When this request is denied, the monster is effectively abjected a second, final, time: it will receive no community whatever, no interpellation, no place within the symbolic, and thus will not exist for the world, which equals death. This is precisely the death he returns upon his progenitor. Victor's entire family and his bride are killed, leaving him alone in the world, robbed of that through which his subjectivity had been defined and sustained. Like his monster, he will be alone in the word with an individual mirroring that is dualistic in its nature. The only reflection to be had by either of them is that of this other also completely outside of the social, at a completely barren landscape, dead. *A.I.* is perhaps still more abstract, though we do have a return of the child followed by both his and the mother's death. When David is resuscitated by the aliens, he is offered the opportunity to have his mother also resurrected, though, he is informed, if she is resurrected, she will only live for a single day, at the end of which she must die "again." Naturally, he chooses to posses her for one more day that she may die again, and this time when she dies, he will die with her. After he accompanies her to the bedroom at the end of this day, tucks her in, cries at her unequivocal declaration of love for him, he then gets into bed at her side, takes her hand, and we are told that "that was the everlasting moment he had been waiting for. And the moment had passed, for Monica was sound asleep – more than merely asleep. Should he shake her, she would never rouse. So David went to sleep too. And for the first time in his life, he went to that place where dreams are born." Where Monica's death is explicit, we can read David's death in one of two ways: he joins her in sleep ("So David went to sleep *too*"), never to awake; or the other possible inference is that in going to "the place where dreams are born," and in now having the capacity for dream, he is human, and thus made mortal. From a Lacanian point of view, we might say that in realizing his impossible desire, he engages an unbearable excess (an excess to be held at a distance through maintaining the tensions of desire), which must mean his death.

How, then, does this abjection of the self come to pass? Let me start by proposing that where the abject is "essentially different from uncanniness," (Kristeva, p.233) and though what is uncanny can potentially become abject, what takes place in these narratives is the abjection of what should remain uncanny, that which is intrinsic to the self-subject, and the abjection of which must result in the destruction of the self-subject. If the abject is that which drops away from my body, substances of death we reject in order to confirm ourselves alive, all that which we cut out from our own boarders in order to define ourselves, all which we demand, "that is not me!" in order to be me, then this is precisely where the progenitors of these stories inscribe themselves with their own destruction. They would like to define this uncanny other as 'not me', though this is impossible; where the abjected can and must be cut away, the uncanny can only be turned away from or repressed.[40] Thus here, these gestures of abjection, these attempts at abjecting are rather a fatal denial of an uncanny self. What happens when the progenitors are unwilling to recognize this essential knot, when they handle the uncanny self as abject material, the scab that falls from me and shows me that I, in fact, *am* is the abjection of *I*: in effect, the murder of *I* by my own dark hand, precisely because of the attempt to cut that hand off. This is the problematic factor in Kristeva's equation discussed earlier in regard to *A.I.*

When we consider these progeny, they are automata (*A.I.*, *2001*), the dead returned (*Frankenstein*), and doppelgangers (*Replicants*): the three most characteristic manifestations of the uncanny. They are, in part, potential ghosts or phantasms. In *A.I.*, David can be read as both ghost and fantasy replacement of/for the dead child of Professor Hobby (David's inventor, played by William Hurt), as well as the ghost and fantasy replacement of/for Martin; he is a phantasmatic replacement child, a projection. This is likewise not far off from *Blade Runner* and *Frankenstein*, in which the progenitors are framed as investing their fantasies of god-like generation into an external

[40] Freud defines the uncanny as the return of the repressed. Thus the suggestion at the end of *Fight Club*, for example: Tyler is not destroyed, but rather re-repressed (otherwise this bullet would have killed them both), and as such can potentially reemerge. The narrative ends leaving things with the outward appearance of being resolved, though a tension of complexity, of this irresolvable 'what now?' does remain. This is symbolized through Tyler's marked presence within the fissures of what appears to be continuity: the few frames of the exposed penis/phallus spliced into the ending scene.

body: other child-phantasms.[41] The significance here is the movement from internal wish-fantasy to external materialization-phantom.[42] We might also read HAL as an externalized fantasy: the dream of creating an infallible being, a perfect intellect with superhuman capacity. This 'dream' is present in some capacity in each of the narratives, as it is always present in narratives on artificial life and intelligence, from immortality and cloning to superior intellect and chess-supercomputers. This movement from the internal or familiar, to the external or unfamiliar (or rather the familiar made foreign) is, as Freud makes thoroughly clear, already embodied in the German '*unheimlich*': *heimlich* being an adjective meaning familiar, home-like, trusted, private, secret; while *unheimlich* is both the negative (unfamiliar, un-home-like) and a conflation or collapse of the negative and positive at an unclear boarder (also secret or private, but exposed to myself at a foreign – eternal – location). Also worth noting is that the automaton is central to Freud's discussion of *das Unheimliche* (cf. Freud's reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann's story "Der Sandmann" in *Das Unheimliche*); uncanniness is encountered at locations of confusion concerning the animate and the animated.

In narratives on identity, this type of structuring of human self and unheimlich reflection has a long tradition, even outside of or prior to the science fiction genre. Within the genre and alongside questions newly posed by technological modernity, these portrayals of the uncanny become central as the rigidity of the boarders between what is human and what not (cyborgs of all capacities, clones, the possibility of bioengineered organs and 'prosthetics', and so forth), and between the real (authentic) and the virtual (artificial) become increasingly malleable and fluid. These mirrorings, doublings and externalizations are taken up in locations that point toward this malleability in order to give certain questions utterance. By staging what at first appears to be the abjection of abject material – or, by drawing on the idea of the abject – these narratives do not so much pose the question of 'are bodies without souls abject?' as they force us to consider what we think it is that constitutes a soul and how we perceive, as well as conceive, *humanness*. It is further a trick or tool of these narratives to have human characters

[41] Regarding these fantasies of god-like generation, the attempt to create such a being ex-nihilo is often accompanied by the biblical language commonly associated. What stands out as also particularly of interest here is the idea of creation 'in one's own image' as it were. Thus, there is also a vocalization of the presence of an uncanny reflection.

[42] "[E]twas fremdes aus dem Ich hinausprojiziert." Freud, *Das Unheimliche*, p.248.

[mis]take things uncanny, a non-definable but integral part of themselves exposed, for the abject, only to subsequently find themselves in the position of the abject, which also serves, by inverting positions (living/abject, human/non-human), to undermine our concept of fixed positions concerning these things. Regarding such methods of undermining or destabilization, I have mentioned the importance of aligning sympathies and generating identification in these narratives. Where the uncanny, in one capacity, brings about a confrontation between self and other which necessarily involves a conflation of the two at a certain level (what is taking place on a diegetic level between characters for us to witness as readers), the alignment of sympathies (extra-diegetically) with what should be other (the automaton within the diegesis) encourages identification with the other and puts all of the implied questions in their proper place: the lap of the reader.

Sympathy and Identification: More Humane than Human

> *You're a robot? I should have known. No human being is that humane.*
>
> - Ripley in *Alien Resurrection*

As I've proposed, a director/author will present the characters in a manner intended to align our sympathies with the artificial being. This must begin with a juxtaposition of characters. It is a diegetic moment at which confusion (of sympathies) is established on both sides of the equation, so to speak; that is, confusion is established at the location of both an 'authentic' being and an artificial being who are or appear to be opposed in some manner to one another. This is accompanied by a symptomatic destabilization of identity. At the location of the human, (threatening) uncanniness is experienced.[43] In *Blade Runner*, there are the sexually charged scenes between Rachael and Deckard that take

[43] As we know from Freud in his discussion of Hoffmann's *The Sandman*, the artificial being provides framings of uncanniness (elicits or *embodies* the uncanny) as soon as it begins to appear in fiction. In Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, for example, when mad scientist Dr. Rotwang introduces his automaton to the tyrannical industrialist John Fredersen, Fredersen nervously swallows and recoils startled and disturbed as the automaton proffers its hand.

place at his apartment. That he is bearing an internal struggle is made visually explicit, and one might at first assume that this is due to something that attracts and repels in the same moment. This moment of sexual ambivalence, characteristic in Dick's fiction, finds its roots in that this woman appeals, is so real, so like Deckard himself, though she represents what kills and what he should kill (the abject). Thus we have the internal struggle made uncannily extimate. It should also be noted that Scott/Dick initially have us identify with Deckard as a human only to expose him as a Replicant later. This, as with the other narratives, places him at the position of what he earlier assumed to be abject, though it also does more. This maneuver doubly aligns our sympathy and identification with the artificial because we identify with the Replicants as Replicants and we identify with Deckard as a human, who later turns out to be a Replicant. It is this final twist in the film that yet more substantially supports an ambiguity of difference overall, but especially concerning identity: what the film and book seek to expose throughout the narrative, and the final statement in which they culminate, is that difference between 'artificial' and 'natural' identity, if there is one, is inconsequential; or, there is none. I will return to this point shortly. Continuing with juxtapositionings, in *A.I.* the mother's initial reaction to the uncanny figure is outrage: "I can't accept this! There is no substitute for your own child!" And to the husband, "What were you thinking?!" But then immediately followed by "I don't know what to do… did you see his face? He's so real." Again, an uncanny ambivalence at the location of the 'authentic' finds its external counterpart. In filmic renditions of *Frankenstein*, we have: "It's alive!" The third person neuter pronoun used to indicate non-gendered, non-living *thing* already establishes an internally antagonistic juxtaposition against 'alive', thus the artificial and the authentic contrasted linguistically in one short phrase. This is followed by "what have I done?" exposing the confusion on the part of the doctor. In Shelley's original text, a shear sense of shock and disgust of having exposed that which should remain unexposed is not preceded with any (confused) elation: "How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe…?" Victor Frankenstein as father suddenly and with horror recognizes himself, his own dark (deathlike) reflection, his monster-self, in his creation, and thus rejects (abjects) it. Naturally he does not want to admit the progeny's name – it is his own. Exposure to this double, a simulacrum with a difference (the artificial being

is a likeness with anomalous characteristics which are experienced as that which should not be exposed, that which is disturbing, or that which is threatening) forces human characters to evaluate their own positions and, as I have said, what it means to be human. Questions arise such as: who am I? what is human? how does this compromise me? what (hidden element) is being exposed to me? and so on.

Accompanying these uncanny juxtapositionings, there is an elaboration on the human qualities and characteristics of the artificial beings. I have already discussed the introduction of super-computer HAL9000 in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and that it revolves around questions concerning his relation to the human crewmembers and their relations to HAL. Where Spielberg induces sympathy either through the use of pathos or an application of 'charm' on the part of the artificial, Kubrick muddles the boundaries of where and how to identify by having his machine inform us that it is in possession of an ego or self consciousness, a will, a conscience, and experiences emotions. As we also eventually come to find out, all of our human-machines are endowed with drives (in *A.I.*, Oedipal drives concerning both desire and castration anxiety; not unlike in *Frankenstein*, where the monster desires a wife; and in *Blade Runner* and *2001*, where our automata have self preservation drives). Moreover, when Dr. Poole is questioned as to what it's like to live and work in such close proximity to HAL, he responds that HAL is "just like a sixth member of the crew," and that you come to "think of him really just as an other person." When questioned as to whether he believes that HAL has genuine emotions, Dr. Poole responds that "he acts like he has genuine emotions." Which he then qualifies with, "of course he's programmed that way to make it easier for us to talk to him. But as to whether or not he has real feelings is something I don't think anyone can truthfully answer." End of scene.

Before any narrative information is provided on HAL, our first visual of him is a shot of what would be considered his eye: a type of camera with a red light at the center, like a pupil, not unlike Schwarzenegger's unmasked eye in *Terminator*. Where *Terminator* is more explicit in framing the uncanniness of the artificial eye, or rather the uncanniness of being able to dress it in appearance so like to the human (which Teminator-Schwarzenegger expels from its socket, only to illustrate that it is the uncanny other eye doing the real work), *2001* is perhaps somewhat subtler. Nevertheless, the suggestion

that this eye marks uncanniness becomes explicit. During the interview mentioned a moment ago, while presenting HAL, both the BBC camera and the lens through which we the audience view are focused on a panel of monitors at the center of which is HAL's eye. When questioned on his confidence in his own abilities, the camera (Kubrick's) moves to a close-up of the eye where we are confronted by its red pupil as HAL, in a very matter-of-fact tone ("let me put it this way…"), explains his reliability. Throughout this segment of the film, Kubrick frames this eye as 'watching' the crewmembers, and when there is interaction with HAL, we are usually shown his eye when he speaks. Later, it will be strictly through the use of his eye that HAL perceives the threat to his existence. Although associations between the eye and the human are rather common (with such proverbs as 'the eye is the window to the soul'), Kubrick's particular use of the eye as an indication/suggestion of the human and the uncanny effect of its presence in the artificial was by no means lost on James Cameron and certainly not on Ridley Scott, where in *Blade Runner* it becomes a leitmotif. In both *Terminator* and *Blade Runner*, there is a play on the abject *I* and the abject *eye*. In Cameron's film, there is the scene where the Terminator stands at the sink in his hotel room, cuts away the flesh around the eye-socket and expels the artificial human-looking eye. In *Blade Runner*, though, the eye is present in various capacities throughout the film and always alludes to what it is to be alive, what it is to be human, to be able to perceive the world(s) around you and, from the opposite end, the gaze of the eye is also a proof to the external word that you are alive. Here we have an explicit visualization of the proverbial 'window to the soul': The test designed to identify Replicants, the Voigt-Kampff test, is performed using an apparatus that also has a red camera eye, which looks into the eye of the test subject. It measures emotional response through dilation of the iris and pupil. There are various other framings of the eye, including metaphoric ones such as the sun as eye. In its abject capacity, the eye appears in the scene illustrating its mass manufacture for the Tyrell Corporation. Disembodied eyes fill this scene. When questioning the eye engineer, one of the Replicants takes a handful of eyes and places them on the head and shoulders of the engineer. When the engineer realizes that his visitors are Replicants, he says to the Batty character, "you Nexus 6. I designed your eyes." To which Batty responds, "if only you could see what I've seen with your eyes." Aside from the cleverness of the response, it is

also a commentary on artificial production and genuine experience (authenticity) at the location of the artificial. The irony of this scene is that the eye/I returns in the form of these two Replicants, to its place of manufacture to, once again, destroy its maker. Also, there is the scene of Tyrell's death in which, as I mentioned, Batty kills him by pushing in his eyes: another scene of abjection doubled by abject eyes. Frank Schnelle also points out that "Um (besser) sehen zu können, tragen Tyrell, Chew und der Schlangenmacher Abdul Ben-Hanssan - alle drei Designer künstlichen Lebens - monstroese Brillengestelle." (*Ridley Scott's* Blade Runner, pp. 83). This is another instance in which, the human takes on the characteristics of the cyborg, the artificial, where the artificial has taken on the characteristics of the 'authentic', the human. As we know, the eye is also central to Freud's reading of Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* and central to the story itself. As Freud points out, the motive of the Sandman is to tear out the eyes of the children. Moments of trauma are continually related to the eyes (also, Freud points out that this – the fear of the loss of eyes/sight – should be read in relation to castration anxiety) and to those interested in obtaining or somehow manipulating them - the threatening Other: "der schluss der Erzählung macht es ja klar, dass der Optiker Coppola wirklich der Advokat Coppelius und also auch der Sandmann ist."[44]

In these artificial being narratives, we begin with a juxtapositioning which destabilizes positions (of sympathy); then we have a presentation of human characteristics at the location of the physically artificial; and next, what we often have is a comparison between the 'human' characteristics of the android and those of an authentic human. The characteristics that I am interested in here are ones concerning the emotional/spiritual and/or the moral. In order to generate sympathy and identification (audience with android), the humans are sometimes portrayed as brutal, unemotional, naïve, self-consumed, immoral, and the like. For example: "If in HAL we see Kubrick's vision of the machine becoming human, In Bowman and Poole we observe how humans are becoming dehumanized and machinelike because of their close association with

[44] Band IIX, p.242. The end of the story exposes that the optician Coppola is really both the solicitor Coppelius and the Sandman.

technological 'offspring'."[45] Though, I should note, this is not always the case: some narratives are more ambiguous, not necessarily portraying one as better or worse than the other, but rather displaying these 'personality' characteristics at the location of the artificial in a manner that encourages us to understand and identify.

In *A.I.*, we are confronted with a stark contrast in which almost every human is in some capacity unappealing, though the human child Martin is by far the worst: he is malicious, devious, dishonest, selfish, destructive and generally uncongenial. Henry, the father, is what we might call a non-entity, having no authority and rarely an opinion of his own, he is a virtual non-entity in the narrative. Monica, more tolerable, is also portrayed as immature, insecure, irresponsibly and unreflectively engaging her desires and anxieties. Doctor Hobby, also far more bearable but playing a much smaller role, is selfish and self-aggrandized with his lack of concern for certain (moral) consequences of his work and his fantasies of being a god-like creator. In contrast to these are all of the 'Mechas'. Teddy the supertoy is reflective, helpful, honest, has a sense of moral integrity and solidarity. Gigolo Joe also has a sense of solidarity, is helpful, resourceful/clever, and has charm. David, like Spielberg's E.T., is the innocent child-like other, lost, trying to find his way back home. Built as a model of Dr. Hobby's own dead child, he cannot be other than an idealized perfect 'model' child.

In *Frankenstein* we have the brutality of the masses: those that convict Justine and see her hanged and, particularly in filmic renditions, the hysterical crowds that chase the monster down. Additionally, we have the monomaniacal determination with which Victor Frankenstein creates his monster: neglecting his family, neglecting society, neglecting social and moral codes in the transgression of firmly established taboos. In contrast to these, we witness a childlike innocence in the monster, an urge for community, an instinct/impulse to help, all of which are transformed only when met with human aggression, rejection, refusal, and the intent of which are always mistaken by the humans, or are botched either due to his strength or childlike ignorance.

In *Blade Runner*, we find similar constructs in which humans are framed as brutal, morally disinterested, selfish and self-aggrandized in contrast to androids who are sensitive, display and enact solidarity for their kind, and so on; though I would argue that

[45] Gene D. Phillips and Rodney Hill. *The Encyclopedia of Stanley Kubrick*, pp. 139.

Dick is, first, less of a (moral) idealist and, second, that he is not so interested in overcompensating the androids' human qualities in order to convince his audience of their humanness (or of the artificiality of 'humanness' itself), but is rather interested in overtly rather than implicitly making unclear the differences between the human and the artificial; and thus we are not presented with a dialectic good/bad or human/non-human.

Kubrick is more like Dick in this respect. He does not overtly frame his humans as monsters and his 'monsters' as human, but is subtler. Both of them provide scenes according to which we are 'instructed' to identify on both sides of the equation, and thus a level of ambivalence is achieved which results in ambiguity concerning the division of these two sides of the equation - again, where or what is the difference between the human and the artificial? In moments when it becomes most explicit, this question is sometimes marked by a statement from the artificial which assumes what is human at the location of the artificial. In *2001*, when Dr. Bowman is removing the memory cards from HAL (a representation of his central nervous system), HAL pleads with him to stop, saying he's scared, and then, "Dave, my mind is going." Similarly, in *A.I.* when David returns to doctor Hobby and is informed that neither is he one of a kind nor is there a Blue Fairy, he replies, "my brain is falling out." Each moment of the artificial being declaring the status of its *mind*, that it in fact possesses a mind, is preceded by a highpoint in the explication of the android's humanness.[46] And to return to the uncanny eye, while HAL is being 'disconnected', we get a close-up of his eye, evidence of his being-ness, as he sings his last words.[47]

[46] In *2001* it is the pleading for his life, the repetition of the statements "I'm afraid" and "I can feel it," and the singing of the song his instructor taught him shortly after his inception. In *A.I.* it is the culmination of David's travels, that he indeed has the determination and *drive* of a human, and that, at seeing a simulacra of himself, he reacts with a human hysteria and violence that even the android Gigolo Joe cannot fathom.
[47] Seesslen calls the scene in which Bowman disengages HAL's memory "eine der schrecklichsten und anrührendsten Szenen der Filmgeschichte." *Stanley Kubrick und seine Filme*, pp. 171.

The Authenticity of Identity

You ask such silly questions, David.
Nobody knows what 'real' really means.
- Teddy in Brian Aldiss'
"Super-Toys Last All Summer Long"

We are all replicants!
- Jean Baudrillard
Screened Out

What we end up with are monsters who seek society, who demand the love that it would seem every proper subject somehow has a right to; boy-robots that will go to the ends of earth and time for the love of their mothers; androids who suffer an irretrievable past, a past they believed belonged to them, who believe they have been cheated out of both past and future; and super-computers with survival instincts. What is perhaps obvious here is the humanness in all of these things: we are all individuals ('monsters') seeking society, believing that we have an irrevocable right to love and to be loved, even feel somehow that it is life's promise to us; we are all driven by our family histories and will cross the earth and our time on it pursuing desires that are in one way or another (or precisely) connected to the desires of our mOthers; we assume without a conscious doubt that we have indelible contracts on our past and future, that they are ours and ours alone; and we will fight to preserve our positions at one end of an ever receding past and at the other of an ever immanent future as long as we can in order to remain in the perpetual deferral that is our now. That is to say, these are accurate replicants and the otherness or alien-ness they embody is the alien-ness, the strangeness, in ourselves.[48] But what's more, as Jean Baudrillard insists, we are also accurate replicants: life makes no promise but one (and it's not love); we have all been *programmed* with Other desire; and our experiences in time (our pasts and futures) are by no means indelible, but are rather constantly rewritten and 'fictionalized' through memory and perception.

[48] See Kristeva's "Strangers to Ourselves."

To summarize, the androids in these narratives are written with human characteristics that, at a certain point, become non-functional or seem to break down because they are not human subjects. But, what these narratives attempt to make explicit is that it is the very same locations at which things breakdown for the human subject as well. Moreover, if we are to follow Baudrillard a bit further, the question is much simpler: Why are we mirrored with these types of (fictional) representations? Because they (cyborgs/androids) show us something about ourselves that human mirrors can't (or don't appear to) - what *human* is: that there is no more *authentic*, that the original is irretrievably lost, and that there is no access to the real whatsoever,[49] that what we understand as some of the primary constituents of what it means to be human are artificially constructed (having nothing to do with 'natural' development). As Katherine Hayles argues in her discussion of what it means to be 'posthuman', "even a biologically unaltered *Homo Sapiens* counts as posthuman," because "the defining characteristics involve the *construction of subjectivity*, not [necessarily] the presence of non-biological components;"[50] and further that "[o]f all the implications that the first wave of cybernetics conveyed, perhaps none was more disturbing than the idea that the boundaries of the human subject are constructed rather than given."[51] Or, as Slavoj Žižek suggests: "In short, one should claim that 'humanity' as such ALWAYS-ALREADY was 'posthuman' – therein resides the gist of Lacan's thesis that the symbolic order is a parasitical machine which intrudes into and supplements a human being as its artificial prosthesis."[52] Earlier I discussed a scene from *2001* within the context of artificial beings as endowed with human characteristics: Dr. Poole says of HAL that "he acts like he has genuine emotions…of course he's programmed that way to make it easier for us to talk to him." What I would add to this is that we are all *programmed that way*.

[49] Baudrillard would push this further by stating that the real is simply gone (not the Lacanian real, but the real in terms of an original, in terms of reality, that all is virtual and lacks authenticity due to an all encompassing Warhol-like reproduction of things), that all is production and production is necessarily always already reproduction intended for further reproduction, that we are only left with representations of representations, and that everything has become, as he so nicely illustrates through Borges, a one to one map of a map of a map…of a lost original.
[50] *How We Became Posthuman*. Pp. 4. My italics.
[51] Pp. 84.
[52] *On Belief*, pp. 44.

In the narratives I have discussed, not only does the construction of 'artificial' identities take place in the realm of the symbolic (which, like all identity, they must); they all ultimately suggest that it is precisely a location of identity within the symbolic and the processes attached to it that constitute the Human, thus exposing the fallacy of authenticity - that by its very nature *identity is artificial* because it is a directed construct for the human just as it would be for an 'artificial' being. Here is the irresolvable antagonism. The question is not, 'what is human and what is artificial?' but rather, 'where exactly is the substantive difference in identity between the two?'[53] If these films indicate that the real (the authentic) has vanished, it is perhaps by embodying the human in what would be non-human and by making what should be human non-human, artificial: We are presented not only with the problem of the human at the very center of the artificial (*A.I.*: an identity based on the human traits of love and the possession of archetypal narratives – Oedipus); but also with the problem of the artificial at the center of the human (*Blade Runner*: the artificial implantation of identity/memory, which consequently uproots any definitive determination of 'authenticity' and calls into question the authority of a 'natural' process of subject creation).[54] As Jean Baudrillard suggests in *Simulacra and Simulation*, "it is the real that has become our true utopia – but a utopia that is no longer in the realm of the possible, that can only be dreamt of as one would dream of a lost object."[55]

[53] Or as Seesslen suggests, characters such as David from *A.I.* produce the question "where are the boarders to being human drawn?" Pp. 234, my translation.
[54] Many of the novels of William Gibson and Philip K. Dick as well as films such as *Abre Los Ojos*, *eXistenZ*, and the *Matrix* among other virtual reality narratives are constructed around precisely this idea.
[55] Again, with Baudrillard's use of "real," it is not so much the Lacanian real that is intended as the authentic, or the original.

Part II. Conspiracy, an Introduction

An Introduction to the Characteristics of Conspiracy

> *The retreat of the accepted Big Other accounts for the prevalence of code-cracking in popular culture… Believing there is a code to be cracked is of course much the same as believing in the existence of some Big Other: in every case what is wanted is an agent who will give structure to our chaotic social lives.*
> - Slavoj Žižek, "You May"

Where narratives on automatons and artificial beings tend to explore and expose crises in relation to the authenticity of identity, conspiracy narratives tend to begin with the line of though that *identity and subjectivity are directed constructs*, and pose questions specifically concerning the subject's relation to the big Other; that is, pose questions which ask who or what is directing the construction. In this regard, the subject's anxiety about its status has less to do with authenticity and more to do with agency. More precisely, a crisis in authenticity can be identified as the origin of the anxiety present in conspiracy. Thus there is a direct relation here. The fallacy that cyborg narratives exposes and the crisis in agency thematized in conspiracy narratives both have as their 'false premise' the idea that the individual has an authentic, autonomous, protected inner core from which identity, and thus a sense of selfhood, radiates forth. We might thus say that cyborg narratives are postmodern precisely insofar as they explode the myth of the liberal humanist subject with a protected inner core (the postmodern subject validates the fluidity of 'boundaries'). Following this logic, we can say that conspiracy narratives give utterance to a patently postmodern anxiety which is directly connected to the explosion of this myth: the very fear that we do not possess a protected inner core, that our (identity/subjectivity) boundaries *are* in fact fluid.

Let's begin by addressing concepts of *crisis within the social symbolic* as outlined within the framework of conspiracy by Mark Fenster and Timothy Melley. They have primarily to do with agency and power, which must be recognized as central

characteristics in conspiracy thinking (conspiracy narratives and theories). Other common characteristics of conspiracy narratives that will be of interest are ('internal' vs. 'external') manipulation, language and code, signification and interpretation, paranoia, schizophrenia, and locations and incarnations of authority, such as political and corporate bodies, and those of a more distinct 'otherness', such as aliens. Fenster and Melley posit conspiracy theories as reactionary narratives. Melley's central concept is *agency panic*: "intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control – the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been 'constructed' by powerful external agents."[56] We can already see here how this type of approach to conspiracy lends itself to a Lacanian reading as a crisis of identity/subjectivity in relationship to the big Other: something has gone astray in the subject-symbolic-Other 'relationship'. To say that one's actions are controlled by someone *else* or someone *Other*, and that we are controlled by 'powerful external agents' is nothing new in psychoanalysis (nor to postmodern thought): this is precisely the point of the desire of the big Other or the Name-of-the-Father, and we see them as absolutely essential to individual subjectivity. Thus, this type of 'external determination' does not, through necessity, lead to crisis. Rather, there appears to be an epistemological problem: that of the subject having knowledge of her/his 'external' determination.

Melley states that "in most cases, agency panic has two features. The first is a nervousness or uncertainty about the causes of individual action [fear of manipulation; uncertainty concerning authenticity]. This fear sometimes manifests itself in a belief that the world is full of 'programmed' [*Blade Runner, Matrix*] or 'brainwashed' [*Manchurian Candidate, Conspiracy Theory, Time Out of Joint*] subjects, addicts, automatons [Metropolis and it's several progeny], or 'mass-produced' persons [*A.I.*, clone narratives]" and that "often, the anxiety consists of a character's fear that he or she has been personally manipulated by powerful external controls. Many postwar narratives depict characters who feel they are acting out parts in a script written by someone else or who believe their most individuating traits have been somehow *produced from*

[56] *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Pp. 12.

without."[57] Again, one is tempted to read this as a rewording of what is at stake in the Lacanian/Althusserian notion of subject formation. The point, though, that sticks out here and that the trajectory of my argument is aimed at is that of something having gone wrong within the subject/Other 'exchange':[58] there is an anxiety concerning the 'production' of subjectivity wherein which the individual is jarred by the shift in perspective on identity from something organic and internal (modern; humanist), and that one has relative autonomy, to something constructed and external (postmodern; 'posthuman'). Before theorizing the functionality of conspiracy narratives, though, we will consider some factors concerning this 'panic' and the practical (psychological) response of conspiracy theories. As is often noted, and as Melley puts plainly, this identity-related 'panic' is directly bound up in concepts of agency (what Fenster calls "political voicelessness"). That is to say, the threat that one is constructed and controlled by an external agent is threatening for the subject precisely because the subject feels unable to affect meaningful action. Let's consider the elements of agency and some other common characteristics of conspiracy narratives.

The Psychological Use of Conspiracy Narratives

When considering the psychological uses of conspiracy narratives (conspiracy narratives as symptom formation or as that which functions to shield against particular anxieties…), we should delineate two different types of targets a majority of the more popular narratives aim at. Though the trajectories of many of these films have similar points of origin (thematically and structurally) and structural similarities throughout, we can identify a fundamental departure from one another concerning the symbolic register a particular subject (the protagonist, the 'conspired against subject') favors. If we take into consideration films such as *Silkwood* (Mike Nichols), *Arlington Road* (Mark Pellington)

[57] Pp. 12. Italics mine. This is precisely what is at stake in Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate*, which is particularly interesting because it literally poses the mother as the mOther/conspiratorial agent and twines this in questions of/complications with (Other) desire.

[58] I use what might seem and odd choice of the word 'exchange' here to implicate both a transaction between two parties in which something is given and something received, where there exists a certain relational structure (as in 'they exchanged glances' or 'they exchanged ideas'), and also the idea of foregoing possession of one 'thing' – one's autonomous 'self' – for another – subjectivity.

and *The Insider* (Michael Mann), we find examples of narratives that are directed at an embracing of symbolic structures and communities in that the subject's very subjectivity within the symbolic community (their family, their job) is what is threatened 'from the outside', and they fight to retain their position (not incidentally, this is rather similar to the position of the androids in the narratives of the first chapter); that is, they struggle to retain their status as 'subject' within the social syntax. They are subjects set upon by some really existing malevolent big Other. We could call these types of conspiracy narratives 'social conformist' narratives. Most of the narratives I will be discussing, though, have a trajectory which aims at the rejection of specific symbolic spaces and delineate a move toward adherence to the imaginary, not necessarily because the subjects have had something revoked (as in the social conformist or android narratives), but because they are disquieted by the position of being (an inconsequential) part of a larger machinery and the idea of being determined or compromised by external agencies. In such cases, a 'knowledge' of the Other gives way to *fear* of the Other, rejecting such conditions for the sake of 'individuality' or 'personal freedom'; that is, of autonomy. Such individuals reject the *idea* of being compromised or constructed, which in turn, and somewhat paradoxically, compromises their status as a *social individual* - a subject.

Melley's defining features of *agency panic* are constituted by a "sense that controlling organizations are themselves agents – rational, motivated entities with the will and the means to carry out complex plans… Thus, agency panic not only dramatizes doubt about the efficacy of individual human action [the first defining feature], it also induces a *postmodern transference* in which social regulation seems to be the intentional product of a single consciousness or monolithic 'will'."[59] We might thus view the two features of Melley's *agency panic* in terms of the *individual* who is to be unwillingly manipulated (the conspired against, panic-stricken subject of conspiracy) and the malevolent *Other*, who imposes his 'will' on the individual (the conspiratorial agent). It should be noted that within such a dynamic, there is no room for contingency. In this sense, historic conditions do not give rise to historic events so much as a willful 'engine', or agent, determines events. Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* provides a fine model of the power relations as outlined by

[59] Pp. 12-13. Here we can see the parallels between the really existing malevolent external agent of authority (*Silkwood, Insider*) and the more nebulous transformation of social regulation into a "monolithic will."

Melley, and comments specifically on the psychological fears and symptoms that accompany them. As Tom Stoppard has commented, *Brazil* is about "the myth of the free man in an un-free society."[60] The narrative is structured upon a (imaginary) rejection of an omnipotent corporate/governmental (there appears to be no real distinction between the two in the film) Other. Sam Lowry's (Jonathan Pryce) aversion to a resolute engagement with the corporate Other is symbolized through his reluctance to accept an inevitable promotion in his job.

Due to his family heritage - his father having been an influential man in 'the firm' - Lowry is assured a position at "information retrieval," the highest level to which one can aspire within the firm, though he is reticent, imagining that he identifies with the common worker who lacks agency, who is set upon and whose freedom is compromised by the corporate machine. It is the bureaucratic Other that represents or is in possession of Melley's "monolithic 'will'." In this regard, the primary conspiratorial agent is the bureaucratic machine itself, which plots against freedom and individuality.

The film opens with a mistake made by "information retrieval," which is regarded as the all seeing, all knowing, and all-powerful (and in such capacities, god-like) heart of this machinery, which, despite its supposed infallibility, has scheduled the wrong person for 'interrogation'. In typically excessive Gilliam fashion, this consists of a unit of Stormtrooper-like servicemen infiltrating the Buttle residence, taking Mr. Buttle by force and, restraining him in a straightjacket and a large black shackle around his neck, reading him his rights in front of his horrified family before carting him off to his execution. All this happens because of thirty-one pounds and six pence which the 'right man' (not Buttle) had neglected to pay. This functions as a radical framing of the machine's disregard for autonomy and freedom, illustrated through its disregard for human life. Efficiency and exactitude have replaced these as primary 'social' concerns. Early on in the film, Sam Lowry is woken by a call from his superior (Ian Holm), informing him that he is late for work, to which he responds, "the electrics here are up the spout…oh yours too?" This, along with the following scene, in which we see one appliance after another in Sam's completely automated apartment go 'up the spout', as well as the opening scene,

[60] Again, the notions of freedom and choice in relation to the Lacanian subjects are indispensable and will be discussed in detail further on in the chapter "Lacan's *Vel* and Determinism."

which functions as the originating circumstance upon which the story is built (Buttle's false 'arrest'), all signal to us, the viewers, that the world of *Brazil* has been highly automated for the sake of an all important efficiency, though this automated world continually malfunctions, and in addition to which it is devoid of any sense of humanity. Poignantly, it is the 'human touch' that functions as the ghost in the machine: Harry Tuttle (Robert De Niro) plays at an alternate level of conspiracy in the film. He and the crew to which he belongs are a subversive group of renegade plumbers/electricians who, using unconventional, and thus unacceptable, methods (they go around or work independently of the corporate/bureaucratic machinery) secretly move through the urban infrastructure, making needed repairs and keeping things functioning.[61] They both subvert the system and uphold it at the same time. This is one of several points in the film where we witness an opposition set up between the empowered subject - who, despite the oppressiveness of bureaucracy, struggles to maintain a benevolent social structure wherein which people help people - and the oppressive Other, embodied in the bureaucratic machine. Sam's desire to identify with the 'liberated' community is illustrated in his continual indulgence in daydreams of love (tellingly, he falls in love with a woman who is a truck driver, a 'common' worker) and ‘freedom’. Though for Sam, beset by 'agency panic' and thus literally trapped within the machinery, his dreams remain precisely that - dreams - and he continually moves toward or within imaginary space and rejection of the social symbolic. This point is made evident throughout the film via his perpetual daydreaming, and made thoroughly explicit in the end, where he is in something of a self-induced lobotomizing fantasy space.

The first time we encounter Lowry in the narrative, he is dreaming. He is soaring through the clouds like a superman, when he comes upon his 'object of desire': an unnamed woman (Kim Greist) floating angelically in the clouds, who he will later meet in his 'real life'. He flies to her, kisses her, and then ecstatically soars higher into the sky before being woken up by his telephone. Two things should be noted here. First, there is

[61] In this regard, they clearly represent the proletariat, the bodies and lives of which any means of (capitalist) production depend upon, though which often sees itself as treated unjustly by that which it serves. Also in connection to this are the statements made by such characters to the effect of "we're all in this together." Both Tuttle and the Oracle from *The Matrix* say exactly this (which should equally act as a reminder of the subject's symbolic debt), and we see it on a billboard while Sam is driving through the urban landscape, characterized by tall uniform buildings with nuclear reactors atop them ("Shangri-La Towers").

Lowry's costume and his wings. They are not natural wings, the kind that are 'just there' (with feathers) in a dream and don't necessarily appear artificial or draw attention to themselves. The costume and wings have a pronouncedly artificial appearance, as if to call attention to their being produced. With this, and with the kiss that inspires him to soar yet higher upward into the sky, the scene is reminiscent of the myth of Icarus, who, despite his father's warning, flies too high, too close to the sun and singes (or rather melts) his wings, thereby falling to his death. We will want to keep the suggestion of this myth in mind when considering the extent to which Lowry will indulge his fantasy. Secondly, when we see the woman suspended in the air, it is against a backdrop of sky where the sun is most prominent. She is framed on top of the sun, just off center, equating flying too close to her with flying too close to the sun. Also worth noting is that she is encapsulated in some sort of netting; she is trapped, and Sam's impulse to act as her liberator, her hero, will become essential to the progression of the narrative. He engages this impulse as the impetus for his individual empowerment. That is, he will *act* as an empowered subject, a subject with agency, in the attempt to 'free' this woman of the constraints he imagines her to be bound by - though this is a false agency grounded in a notion of freedom leading, Icarus-like, to his downfall.

The question of agency is made further explicit by the opposition between the bureaucratic machine and the terrorist groups who detonate bombs at strategic points (in stores, shopping centers, and up-scale restaurants) throughout the urban landscape. The opposition between 'established' bodies of authority and terrorists (an opposition becoming increasingly ambiguous in contemporary international politics) is always about agency, with acts of terrorism functioning as a claim to agency expressly enacted for the attention of - 'in the face of' - the Law/Other. The film opens with an explosion in a television shop. Amidst the rubble and burning debris, there is a close-up of a television monitor airing a news show:

> TV moderator: Deputy Minister…what do you believe is behind this recent increase in terrorist bombings?

> Minister: Bad sportsmanship. A ruthless minority of people seems to have forgotten certain good old-fashioned virtues. They just can't stand seeing the other fellow win. If these people would just play the game, they'd get a lot more out of life.

In this context, "bad sportsmanship" and not being willing to "just play the game" are other ways of saying that an individual is unwilling to act under the aegis of the Other and accept a status equal to the *others* around him. Why? Precisely because the individual feels compromised, feels cheated of something, and the symptom of this 'fear of being cheated' bodies itself as an action which makes the statement, "I will not be cheated; you can't control me [Neo's statement to the architect in *Reloaded*]; I have agency! Boom!"

Additional narrative locations at which Sam's 'agency panic' is given utterance are his dream of monolithic buildings erupting from the earth, taking over the natural environment in which Sam flies about feeling free, and hallucinations in which he is challenged by a giant samurai who is at one point mechanical, made of metal and light, and at another emerges from - and consists of - the bricks of the city streets. He is the 'personification' of Sam's fears of some monolithic uncompromising (and unnatural) will acting against him. He springs forth when Sam feels overwhelmed by his hostile mechanized and bureaucratic or stifling industrial surroundings, the framing of which is explicit. In one scene, he comes home to his apartment to find two men from "Central Services" gutting the walls of its innards. The apartment is full with piping, tubing, wiring and the like, to the extent that one can barely move within it. Once they find a piece of equipment in the walls that shouldn't be there (that was installed by the renegade Buttle), they leave him with his apartment in this condition and there is nothing he can do to prevent their going. He feels powerless, overwhelmed. Later in the film, once he has accepted the offer of a post at Information Retrieval (in order to have access to information concerning the mysterious woman he has been dreaming of) he is shown to his parodically miniscule office. As he sits at his desk, it begins to disappear into the wall, at which point he goes to the next office, only to find that he shares a desk with the neighboring officer, and that this man is trying to get more desk for himself. When Sam sees a computer in this office, he begs to use it, but the neighbor refuses, saying he will find the information himself and then relay it to Sam, who returns to his office again

feeling defeated, feeling helpless. He sits at his desk and dreams of the Samurai, the fantastic embodiment of that which compromises his agency. Each time he dreams of the Samurai, the woman he fantasizes about is always in danger, always its captive. Again, this will lead him to the conviction that it is his task to free her: it will provide him with a (imaginary driven) mandate that will in turn provide an opportunity for the application of agency. Quite to the point, when he first defeats the Samurai and removes its mask, he sees his own face. Of course, we already know that it is himself that he is continually struggling with. He himself is that which compromises his agency, and in this regard, his fantasies are telling him something about his choices and his fears.[62] This returns us to the point of the 'use' of conspiracy in such narratives: it objectifies, substantiates, and validates the subject's fears.

Another facet of agency panic delineated by Melley in conjunction with the problem of agency, or the lack of it, is that of *responsibility* in relation to action. He posits that, in addition to the popularity of conspiracy narratives stemming from a "sense of *diminished human agency*, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action…in extreme cases, [they] may not be able to control their own behavior" (11). This calls to mind characters such as Thomas Pynchon's Manny Di Presso's in *The Crying of Lot 49*, who "can't even keep up the payments on that XKE that I bought while temporarily insane" (40). Examples of this cultural phenomenon abound in fiction as they do in contemporary American society (private, corporate, political), from the corporate denial of knowledge concerning child labor and sweatshops, to the tobacco industry's denial of knowledge that nicotine is addictive, to the Regan administration's denial of knowledge concerning support of military activity in Nicaragua and weapon sales in Iran, to Bill Clinton's linguistic gymnastics of denial ("I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky"), to the Bush Jr. administration's 'misinformation' concerning Iraq's possession of weapon's of mass destruction. What we increasingly see is a trend in which it is acceptable to deny responsibility for one's actions. This has become routine strategy in corporate and political America (of course, not only in America), and is increasingly commonplace in the private sector. People increasingly seem to feel that

[62] Within the suggestion that he alone is the reason for his lack in agency, there is the suggestion that the all imposing Other he finds himself smothered by is not an Other, but rather a mirror. That is to say, there is no Other, other than his projected fears.

they can divorce themselves from their actions, that they can literally 'get away with murder'. We might think of such conditions in conjunction with what Žižek terms the logic of victimization: “is the basic characteristic of today’s ‘postmodern’ subject not the exact opposite of the free subject who experienced himself as ultimately responsible for his fate, namely the subject who grounds the authority of his speech on his status of a victim of circumstances beyond his control?”[63]

In conspiracy fiction, there are characters such as Sergeant Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey) and Major Bennett Marco (Frank Sinatra) from John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* or Jerry Fletcher (Mel Gibson) from Richard Donner's *Conspiracy Theory*, as well as many of P.K. Dick's characters, who have either been brainwashed, cloned, or otherwise programmed or manipulated and thus are not in control of their actions insofar as they are 'not themselves'; their 'own' selves have been in some capacity 'hijacked' and employed in the service of some malevolent all-enjoying Agent. In this regard, they are also not "able to control their own behavior."

Manipulation: *we are programmed to receive*

Preceding any notion that an individual might be in some way manipulated or 'programmed' is an assumption that must also precede any crises such as agency panic and the like: an assumption that the individual is, or once was, autonomous, had agency, was in possession of some defining and individuating element at its core (was in possession of a 'protected inner core'), and was in all other respects 'in control' of itself. In opposition to, or as a late and inevitable development of this, is that the "notion that memory and identity may be wholly reconstructed is a familiar subject in postwar America. Popular conspiracy films (such as Donner’s *Conspiracy Theory* and Frankenheimer’s *Manchurian Candidate*), UFO culture, recent psychological literature, and science fiction (e.g., *The X-Files*, Dick’s "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale" [*Total Recall*], and Scott’s *Blade Runner*) all circulate stories of ‘implanted’ memory."[64]

[63] *On Belief*, pp. 124.
[64] Melley, pp. 198.

Provided this dualistic structure as the relational basis of conspiracy narratives, and despite the fact that the conspirators are often presented as some anomalous group that is particularly difficult to identify, we find ourselves dealing with a (rather traditional) protagonist-antagonist dramatic (Hegelian) dialectic which finds its 'synthesis' in the interdependence of one upon the other: conspiratorial agent - conspired against subject.[65] In the fictions Melley makes mention of here directly and indirectly, we generally witness conspiracies wherein which the conspiratorial agents are either 'the government', some covert political body, one or more corporations, or other private 'special interest' groups, though we can generally categorize the conspiratorial agent as either political, corporate, or a combination of the two. Whatever the case, the structure of the protagonist - antagonist (or subject - malevolent Other) relationship is, as a rule, erected upon the same principal: the Other uses the subject as the medium through which it can attain certain desired effects.[66] This is achieved through the manipulation of the subject, usually 'initially' unbeknownst to the subject himself. Though the *modus operandi* of manipulation is most often one in which the subject is 'internally' manipulated - that is, brainwashed or somehow programmed - Mark Pellington's *Arlington Road* offers an interesting departure here.[67]

Michael Faraday (Jeff Bridges), a university professor holding lectures on conspiracy, suddenly finds himself at the center of one. Interestingly enough, it seems that it is his suspicion which *draws him into* the particular conspiracy that is in any case already taking place without him, though after having decided to interfere, with the intention to foil the conspiracy, the conspiratorial agents find a useful task for him: he will act as the

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[65] In addition to the Hegelian notion of the dialectic which is based upon an 'opposition' wherein which thesis and antithesis gravitate toward the 'third term' of synthesis (e.g. being - not being - becoming), it will be particularly useful for developments made in part three of this study to think of conspiracy narratives in relation to the Kantian notion of the dialectic as false reasoning, through which one arrives at (false) knowledge regarding self, the world, and God (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 'Transcendental Dialectic').

[66] It might, though, be argued that this really only holds true from the point of view of the conspired against subject, who, not incidentally, is usually the one closest to the viewer's point of view, even when the viewer is more or less 'in the know'; that is to say, the narratives are nearly always constructed in a manner that directs our sympathies toward the conspired against subject.

[67] Concerning narratives framing 'internal' manipulation, Melley says of them, "[t]hese futuristic tales contain the same radical plot element: the rebellion of persons against corporate systems that have literally constructed and programmed them" (189). Thus, on another level, it is also useful to think of manipulation in these narratives in connection with capitalistic, corporate culture vs. the decline of liberal individual autonomy: that is, reading *Matrix, Ghost in the Shell,* The *Alien* Quadrology *et al*. through a Marxist lens - the malign corporate vs. the liberal individual.

primary medium through which their task will be achieved. Once his girlfriend has been murdered and after he has uncovered a string of evidence indicating that his neighbors (Joan Cusack and Tim Robbins) are terrorists, his son is kidnapped by them and used as 'leverage' to insure that Faraday doesn't interfere with their plans to blow up a government building. Following a trail of clues, he is led to an outlet of the "Liberty Delivery Service," where he sees men he recognizes in association with his neighbors loading suspicious looking cases into one of the delivery vans. He decides to follow the van, and while stopped at a red light, his son appears in the rear window of the van, at which point he decides to 'blow his cover', and a car chase ensues. While racing down an alleyway in pursuit of the Liberty van, he is cut off by another van that pulls out of a side street, blocking his passage. His neighbor gets out of the van, pulls Faraday from his car, and, beating him, drags him into an empty building, asking him, "you had to know, didn't you? You had to know… Didn't you check up on me? Didn't you? *Did you really think we leave anything to chance?*" then radios to the others, telling them he's got Faraday and that they are "still on schedule." At this point a fight ensues, after which Faraday runs out to his car and tries to find the van. Having located it, he chases it to the Federal Bureau of Investigation building at 933 Pennsylvania Avenue, where he frantically tries to convince the guards that the van that has just entered the basement parking garage contains a bomb. Being unsuccessful and fearing for his son's life, he speeds forward after the van, jumping the barrier to the entrance of the garage. Once inside, Faraday sees that the van is empty, that this is in fact *the wrong van*, and he realizes he's been duped into following it. With this knowledge, he runs back to his car, only to have his suspicions confirmed: upon opening the trunk of the car, a bomb explodes in his face, destroying the entire building.

Let's momentarily digress to the distinction I made earlier between conspiracy narratives whose protagonists recognize their stake in the symbolic (in symbolic communities) and struggle to uphold it versus those who tend toward imaginary space. Faraday is both 'externally' manipulated (not brainwashed, for example, but blackmailed) *and* tries to protect his symbolic investitures: this is a conspiracy narrative that 'believes' in conspiracy. What I wish to implicate with this term are narratives in which subjects cling to symbolic investitures threatened by a really existing (within the fiction, of

course) malevolent Other (thus the narrative 'believes'). Faraday is threatened by an agent of the Other's malevolent desire, and what is threatened is his stake in the symbolic fictions that define him as a subject - his family is under threat, his job is under threat, his social credibility is under threat. The two films I mentioned earlier (*Silkwood* and *The Insider*) whose main characters are also such subjects trying to protect their symbolic investitures, also believe in conspiracy.[68] It should be noted though that *Arlington Road* continually 'flirts' with the possibility of Faraday's being pathologically paranoid and adhering to imaginary fictions. The storyline is constructed in such a way that the characters in the story would tend to think that Faraday is paranoid; whereas throughout the narrative, the viewer tends to think he is not. This split is made explicit in the end when the viewer knows that Faraday has been conspired against, but the intra-diegetic 'public at large' is made to believe (through news media) that he was an obsessed madman. Interestingly, it seems that narratives with the intent of conveying stories about individuals protecting their stake in the symbolic and who are threatened by a really existing malevolent Other tend to frame manipulation as working from a point 'exterior' to the individual (not through brainwashing or some sort of conditioning, as in *Manchurian Candidate* and *Conspiracy Theory*). In this manner, they cannot but (whether they want to or not) propagate the myth of the 'natural' humanist subject with a protected *inner* core. We would have to refer to this as a myth, because, as we have already discussed in the first chapter, we have come to perceive the idea of the 'natural' subject, whose identifying characteristics spring forth from 'within' and are thus 'authentic', as a fallacy. As we will also discuss further on, the Lacanian notion of the subject is strictly prohibitive of any notion of the exclusively external or the exclusively internal. The use of internal and external here are simplifications (for clarity) intended to help distinguish the two types of conspiracy, and are not intended to be taken as possible actualities for the individual or subject. As subject, the individual must incorporate the desire of the Other, which is at once both foreign, and integrally constitutive of the subject (*extimate*). That is to say, the desire of the big Other is something that has as its originary force a correlate outside of the individual, though at the same time, this correlate, along with the Other's desire, only assumes its value, its currecy, when it

[68] They are, not incidentally, both based on true stories.

becomes the cause of the subject's desire as well. When it does this, it becomes constitutive of the subject, and in this sense is both at the very core of the subject, and from without or outside the subject.

In (partial) contrast to such myth-propagating narratives in which the individual is acted upon by an 'external' threat to her/his symbolic status, we have narratives in which the protagonists are 'internally' manipulated. This is constituted either by being brainwashed, as in *Manchurian Candidate* and *Conspiracy Theory*, by being programmed or 'rewritten', as in *Time out of Joint*, *Simulacron Three* and *Matrix*, or by being wholly manufactured by some agent of production, as in *Blade Runner*. In such narratives, the focus is not usually on the symbolic investitures the subject has at stake and is in danger of losing. As we will later see, such narrative types are more interested in illustrating a progression in which the protagonist increasingly adheres (or potentially adheres) to imaginary space, portraying the subject of conspiracy as being given to indulgence in dualistic non-triangulated fantasies. Implicit in the discussion of 'encoded' or 'programmed' subjects is a move toward the notion of fluidity concerning the individual's 'boarders'. In this sense, the anxiety these narratives expose is an anxiety about postmodern subjectivity *beyond* the myth of the 'natural' humanist subject with a protected *inner* core. Where the 'external' manipulation narratives propagate such a myth, the 'internal' manipulation narratives are symptomatic of (a response to) the dissolution of this myth. We will want to consider how these 'internally' manipulated conspired against subjects respond to the specific prompts whose encoding they have been 'programmed' to respond to.

Language, Code, Pattern

> *The work of paranoia is, precisely, to convert contingent, segmented pieces of the real into an observable and interpretable pattern of conspiracy.*
> - Patrick O'Donnell, *Latent Destinies*

Conspiracy narratives are always concerned with 'language' on some level, either as language in the conventional sense (*langage*), or as code and encoding, as pattern, as some type of communication (*langue*), and are pervasively constructed around a central semiotic model: conspiracy consists of continual interpretation (decoding) and inscription (encoding) of signs. We might say that conspiracy narratives are on some level 'aware' of a ‘wall of language’ - that is, the *split* and arbitrary nature of the sign - as the realm in which things are symbolized (in which they are ascribed meaning, fall under the realm of signification) or the realm of social exchange in which interpretation must always take place. It is here that Pynchon, for example, with a finger unwaveringly pointed at language, continually confounds his conspired against subjects. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, the conspiracy that is in place is 'literally' one based on a system of communication: Oedipa Mass discovers a conspiracy at the core of which is a secret postal system that is used, has been used for centuries, as an alternate, secret form of communication. Its symbol, with a touch of irony, is a muted postal horn, indicating a 'muffled' communication - something *not* communicated. Throughout her adventure in which she attempts to discover the secrets surrounding this 'secret service', she learns, to a parodic level, some things about communication theory; namely about entropy.[69] She also yearns to be a 'sensitive': someone who can communicate with a specific machine apparently made for the very purpose of testing one's capacity as a 'sensitive'. And among copious other such details, she happens upon a conference for the dumb and deaf, another reference to both 'muted' communication and alternate forms of communication. Pynchon makes continual reference to information theory and core concepts like 'noise' and 'entropy', constructing a depiction of language as that which divides (veils) at least as much as it unites (exposes) and as that which is the very core and drive of conspiracy in *Lot 49*. This is a common motif in conspiracy narratives. When we consider the Wachowskis' *The Matrix*, Dick's *Time Out of Joint*, Aronofski's *Pi*, Pynchon's *Gravity’s Rainbow*, and Auster's *New York Trilogy*, they are all stories quite literally concerned with reading code: as is said of Ragle Gumm in *Time Out of Joint*, “‘you view a pattern

[69] In every communication there is an amount of 'interference', called *noise*, and there is a loss of a certain amount of information, again, something *not* communicated, called *entropy*. Oedipa is continually confronted with interference in her attempts to inform herself and is constantly faced with gaps in meaning which only seem to expand.

in space, a pattern in time. You try to fill. Complete the pattern…" *The Matrix* takes the problem of language (digital code) as its central point: it is about a world literally *divided* by language, a world in which the majority of people are plugged into a vast machine that feeds their brains, manipulates their sense perception, with information, with 'unreal' narratives, via a vast program or various programs, which, as we know, are always language (based). In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, there is the search for someone who can (re)write genetic coding, and, like *Matrix*, the element of *encoding* thought, implanting memory-experiences, is central to the story.[70] In Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, there is continual emphasis on writing, note taking, and reading, in addition to the fact that, as these are also detective stories, there is the central element of reading/deciphering clues, with one story focusing on the myth of Babel, a myth which is perhaps our first example of how language divides

In Frankenheimer's *Manchurian Candidate*[71], despite the intricate plot development, we are presented with a rather conventional framing of the function of 'brainwashing' in conspiracy. Sgt. Raymond Shaw is an American soldier who is captured and brainwashed for the purpose of being used as a sleeper agent back home. When confronted with a specific prompt, Shaw's world suddenly transforms. He is programmed to respond to the command, "why don't you pass the time by playing a little solitaire," by doing just that. When the queen of diamonds appears, Shaw is programmed to follow any instructions he is given, regardless of what they are. Thus, the narrative presents us with a system of codes and responses (signifiers and deeply ingrained signifieds). Shaw is programmed to 'read' the codes in a manner that likewise exposes a process of decoding and recoding. The command to play solitaire is, as a prompt, encoded with information that triggers Shaw's capacity to be manipulated. It is a prompt that decodes his 'normally codified' world: he no longer perceives the world around him as he normally would and he no longer thinks, or processes information, in the same manner. The queen of diamonds is encoded with information that informs him he is about to receive a mandate that he has no choice but to fulfill, and the mandate he receives reorganizes the codified world

[70] *Blade Runner* is the filmic version of Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* With films such as *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, *Minority Report*, *Paycheck*, and *A Scanner Darkly*, contemporary cinema is heavily indebted to Dick for its sense of false realities and fabricated memories.

[71] Remade in 2004 by Jonathan Demme.

around him in accord with the fulfillment of the task at hand. In this regard, we again see that we are dealing with a semiotic system, a system of representation.

Part III. Meaning in Conspiracy: Grand Theory

Code for Conspiracy

> *What he liked about these books was their sense of plentitude and economy. In the good mystery there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant, it has potential to be so – which amounts to the same thing. The world of the book comes to life, seething with possibilities, with secrets and contradictions. Since everything seen or said, even the slightest, most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story, nothing must be overlooked. Everything becomes essence; the centre of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The centre, then, is everywhere, and no circumference can be drawn until the book has come to its end.*[72]
>
> - Paul Auster, *New York Trilogy*

> *If we fail to anticipate the unforeseen or expect the unexpected in a universe of infinite possibilities, we may find ourselves at the mercy of anyone or anything that cannot be programmed, categorized, or easily referenced.*[73]
>
> - Fox Mulder in *X Files: The Movie*

As narratives which attempt to provide totalizing significance (*and* requiring continual interpretation) to historical events as a whole, conspiracy theories offer a certain (illusory) coherence in meaning less characteristic of or resembling a Lyotardian master narrative, and much more like a theory we will have to borrow from another field: theoretical physics. A Grand Unified Theory (GUT), the 'holy grail' of theoretical physics, would attempt to unify general relativity with quantum mechanics, and thus provide a single applicable 'theory of everything' in which the interaction of elementary particles follows a single formula in diverse fields of physics.[74] When we ask what it means to 'be within' conspiracy, or how conspiracy is encoded, we likewise find ourselves confronted with a situation in which a single formula is used for various, seemingly irreconcilable fields. That is, within the diegesis of conspiracy, diverse 'narrative threads' are read through the lens of a single unified and unifying cause, back to which every finding, every condition, can be traced in its most elementary form.

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[72] Paul Auster, *New York Trilogy*: p.8.
[73] Fox Mulder in *X Files: The Movie*.
[74] It is specifically concerned with a theory of elementary particle interaction that would bring together the separate theories of particle interaction in gravity, electromagnetism, weak interaction, and strong interaction.

Conspiracy is, then, "a process of interpretation that compresses contingent events, memories, or traumas into a singular story that manifests the real of self or nation as organized around a central paranoid 'truth'."[75]

Let us consider the way conspiracy narratives 'read'. The above quote from Paul Auster provides a concise and accurate synopsis on the 'economy and plentitude' of the conspiracy narrative. Though conspiracy theories always point toward, or rather seek out, a source, a center, they do this via a constructive process of inscription in which 'the center' is indeed everywhere. That is to say, what the conspired against subject seeks as center, as cause, informs his interpretation of the clues he finds everywhere. Thus the center is inscribed into all points. Similarly, every piece of information, everything the conspired subject comes into contact with, *is* a clue, is imbued with meaning, and thus all clues - or bits of information - are 'central', or, as Auster points out, "have the potential to be so - which amounts to the same thing." To put it another way, every piece of information the subject analyzes has at its core a specific code for identification, and that code is always the same at the most elementary layer of each piece of information: it indicates that the source-cause for every condition is the conspiratorial agent's will.

Though this tells us something about the structure of signification in conspiracy, about what is essential (everything), we should always remain aware of the fact that the conspired against subject is *always in fact reading code*, and is thus continually engaged in the act of interpretation, and hence inscription. Where we recognize that to *read* is to *interpret*, we must also recognize that to *interpret* is to *ascribe* meaning to the 'object' of scrutiny, and thus rewrite or *inscribe* it. What is important or meaning-full in a clue is not contingent upon whether or not it is 'actually' connected to the conspiring agent; but rather, as Auster points out, with its potential to be so, it becomes so. Thus, what is meaningful - or, the way in which meaning manifests in conspiracy - is not contingent upon its 'real' source. Rather, it is contingent upon what takes place at the level of the signified, i.e. the conspired against subject's reading of it: 'things' are meaningful insofar as they are inscribed (through reading, with meaning). Again, we are faced with an epistemological split: is it 'really' so, or does it merely appear to be so. What is interesting about conspiracy narratives is that they take the *representational nature of*

[75] O'Donnell, *Latent Destinies*, pp. 20.

understanding as their *a priori* premise and 'run rampant' with it, inscribing everything with the same potential, the same meaning.[76]

Interpretation and the Proliferation of Meaning: 'Textual' Playfulness

Fear that holds conspiracy as its object is one which is to be enjoyed; that is, which leaves a variety of gaps in the symbolic structure which can be played over and upon, may be interpreted and projected into, precisely because the general structure is comprehensive enough to provide a certain amount of stability where contingency, or 'non-meaning', would not. "In representing conspiracy…the conspiracy narrative must be able to encompass the world, to posit a new world order."[77]

As discussed above, the role of interpretation in conspiracy theory is central to its functionality, and in order to integrate the various (historical) narratives it encounters, it relies on a porous, amorphous framework that allows for what Fenster calls "the perpetual motion of signification" (78). Such a structure, though totalizing, also offers the possibility of enjoyment through continual interpretation. That is, despite being totalizing, it is not rigid, and in not being so it leaves space for desire insofar as it is projected over a lack. The element of perpetual signification is symptomatic of a lack: where the structure is fluid, where it allows for perpetual signification (and interpretation), is where there is a lacking signifier, and this space can be 'played over' or projected into.

> Both desire and production conceive of conspiracy theory as active, indeed endless, processes that continually seek, but never fully arrive at, a final interpretation… Thus, as an [endless] interpretive practice, conspiracy theory represents an impossible, almost utopian drive to seize and fetishize individual signs in order to place them within vast interpretive structures that unsuccessfully attempt to stop the signs' unlimited semiosis.[78]

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[76] If we follow this logic, it places the conspiratorial agent at the location of the Lacanian *sujet supposé savoir*. We might also note that the conditions of *potential* (lack/gaps) and *inscription* (interpretation) already begin to frame the subject in terms of its imaginary relation to/understanding of things.
[77] Fenster, pp. 123. We might also note that the conditions of *potential* (lack/gaps) and *inscription* (interpretation) already begin to frame the subject in terms of its imaginary relation to/understanding of things.
[78] Fenster, pp. 79-80.

To translate this into Lacanian terminology, placing conspiracy within a psychoanalytical and semiotic perspective or framework, it is constituted by (impossible) attempts to complete a signifying chain, which is equal to an attempt to fill the missing signifier of the Other. Lacan symbolizes the lack of a signifier in the big Other with a barred A: Ⱥ. This 'incompleteness' or lack in the Other is the site where the subject *should* come to be.[79] In conspiracy though, we might say that the conspired against subject perceives a *signifier of a lack* in the Other - symbolized S(Ⱥ) - and frantically, psychotically attempts to extract 'hidden' meaning at the location of lack. As we've discussed, this process is enacted through inscription, through conscious attempts to fill this space, to load lack with a signifier other than that of its own lack. As Patrick O'Donnell suggests: "The cultural production of paranoia is…a symptom/sinthome: it is a projection - a 'signifying, symbolic formation' - that enables the construction of certain versions or representations of identity in which the constituencies of self, body, race, gender, and nation are bound together in the fabrication of the historical subject."[80]

Although the conspired against subject imagines such an undertaking to be productive, imagines that some occult knowledge will come into her/his possession as a result, this is effectively a destructive (de-constitutive) act. As we know, it is the missing signifier in the Other that is constitutive of the subject. We can also think of this in connection to Lacan's concept of the 'subject supposed to know'. In conspiracy, the conspired against subject assumes that there is an Other subject in possession of occult knowledge, thus making two suppositions: the supposition of a locatable *knowledge*, and the supposition of a *Subject* who possesses the knowledge. This is the basic structure of Lacan's *sujet supposé savoir*. A problem in these suppositions is that knowledge "cannot be located in any particular subject but is, in fact, intersubjective."[81] Here we return again to the idea of inscription: the individual assumes s/he is merely 'uncovering' knowledge already there, but in fact s/he is 'making meaning', writing meaning onto lack. In so doing, these attempts to fill this lack are *conscious* interpretations (inscriptions) of potential meaning, or, projections of meaning onto a lack and are thus linked to the ego

[79] Thus the application of Freud's "Wo Es war, soll Ich werden." This concept will be covered later in a chapter with the same title.
[80] *Latent Destinies*, pp. 17.
[81] Evans, pp. 197.

and the imaginary. In this regard, the lack that should constitute the subject at an unconscious (the subject *unconsciously* identifies with the Other's desire) level of engagement, at the level of the unconscious, is instead willfully engaged at an imaginary level as a result of the individual's concern for its identity, its agency, its subjectivity. As I hope to illustrate, it is this very concern that leads the individual to take precisely the wrong course of action, that leads the (conspired against) subject toward an ardent adherence to imaginary relations and realms as opposed to symbolic ones. The individual's anxiety serves as the impetus for actualizing what this anxiety aims at.

Let's turn to a story that 'self-consciously' frames conspiracy as a process of continual (in)*scription* and *enjoyment*, laying emphasis on the 'playfulness' of such narratives: Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. Though *Lot 49* focuses, like many conspiracy narratives, on the proliferation of possible meanings, Pynchon takes this to yet an other level. That is, the conspiracy in the narrative and all the associations spinning off of it are structured with 'the proliferation of possible meanings' as a guiding principal, but Pynchon employs this idea on a textually performative, poststructural level for the reader as well.[82] Put simply, Oedipa and others in the diegesis are confronted with (or are narrated in a manner in which they appear to construct) the proliferation of meaning, and we the reader follow the maze through them, as opposed to reading 'above' them (extra-diegetically), where, from our distance, we can better interpret the 'meaning' of the narrative clues. But one also finds on the extra-diegetic level, upon plot analysis, when we look for meaning, when we look for conclusive evidence in the plot, we find that we are apt to indulge in conjecture: we are nudged into wanting to guess the significance of

[82] What divides *Lot 49* from narratives like *X-Files* or narratives with conclusive endings, among other things, is that it leaves gaps in an 'enclosed' narrative (the book) that begins and ends in a relatively short span of (narrative) time, whereas in *X-Files* the narrative is structured like a conspiracy, leaving interpretive gaps for the reader and constantly opening new ones as the narrative proceeds over an endless extension in (network television) time. That is to say, it is not resolved *not* because the story will literally go on (with new episodes, for example), but rather as a gesture that seems to say that the point of conspiracy narratives does not lie in their resolution, but in their potential to never 'close'. In this respect we can see why 'real' conspiracy theories such as those revolving around the Kennedy assassination are so 'pleasing': this narrative does not 'close'. We can well imagine that if conclusive evidence as to precisely what happened in the Kennedy assassination were made public, the fascination with his death would suffer (the mystery surrounding his death gives it a mythic quality). In fact, one must also recognize that were this to happen, there would inevitably be resistance against and rejection of such a 'conclusion' and in favor of 'open' conspiracy theories.

some event, or to guess what will happen next, or to guess what an underlying cause or motive is, though we repeatedly find that we are textually given only enough to keep things at the level of possibility or potential meaning(fullness). As Deborah Madsen notes: "The narrative does not 'close' the interpretive process by indicating a definitive way of reading both it and the world it describes. The narrative remains open to production by the reader: clues are offered for synthesis but they resist any explicit, one-dimensional interpretation."[83] Thus, what we end up with, in characteristic postmodern fashion, is the proliferation of possible meanings and possibilities in terms of how we as readers read the events in the text: we are at no more of an advantage as to how to read the 'clues' in the narrative than the characters within the narrative. This is an unavoidable aspect of the text. At each turn it provides possible meaning, begs interpretation, and holds forth conclusion or conclusive 'evidence'. Thus, the proliferation of possible meanings functions on the diegetic level for the characters in the story and, in a similar fashion, extra-diegetically for the reader. In this regard, *Lot 49* is a quintessentially poststructural text in its commentary on the nature of language and interpretation (signification).[84] As Peter Knight suggests, with the "creation of a permanent free fall of suspicion, sophisticated forms of conspiracy culture from *The Crying of Lot 49* to *The X-Files* suggest that a final totalizing map can never be reached."[85] We might also say that this text 'knows more' about Lacanian analysis than your average conspiracy narrative in that it portrays the (conspiratorial) Other not only as that which will not be exposed (whose exposure is continually deferred), but that which *cannot* be exposed (whose exposure is based on a principle of deferral), that which there is absolutely no access to.[86] To put this another way, we might view this approach as both engaging the reader, providing him/her with a narrative, but at the same time making what one generally thinks of as a 'core' in the narrative (plot) inaccessible. When we think of a plot, there is classically a trajectory moving from a mapping of the plot within which a certain number of gaps are purposefully provided. Through the plot development, these gaps are either

[83] *Allegory in America*, pp 144.
[84] Supplementing the poststructural notion that the meaning of a text is, by its very nature, unstable - meaning being in a constant state of deferral - Pynchon employs an aesthetic surplus, disseminating an *excess of possible meaning* which performatively enacts the very notion of deferral.
[85] Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files*. Pp. 20.
[86] Furthermore, it portrays the individual's search for the Other as taking place at an imaginary level/location (the ego continually searching out and locating itself).

closed or left open according to how they will best provide meaning, as in mysteries and whodunits. We are often presented with a majority of gaps that will be closed and a minority that are left open for speculation (which in turn allow for potential narrative or poetic reverberation and narrative depth). *Lot 49* consciously and consistently subverts this plot(ing)-system, inscribing gaps into the plot only to expose more gaps underlying the initial ones.[87]

If we start at the 'simple' element of character names, for example, we find that one is repeatedly compelled to look for meaning beyond the common use of an appellation: Oedipa Maas (alias Edna Mosh and Arnold Snarb), Mucho Maas, Pierce Inverarity, Dr. Hilarious, Metzger (alias Baby Igor), Manny Di Presso, Mike Fallopian, Anthony Giunghierrace (alias Tony Jaguar), Richard Wahrfinger (author of *The Courier's Tragedy*), Randolph Driblette, Mr. Clayton 'Bloody' Chiclitz, Stanly Koteks, Mr. Thoth, Genghis Cohen, John Nefastis, Omedio Tassis, Inigo Barfstable, Emory Bortz, Jesús Arrabel, Robert Scurvham and the Scurvhamites, C. Morris Schrift, Warpe, Wistfull, Kubitschek, McMingus, and so on. We are both tempted to view them as language play, as textual playfulness, and to find greater significance in them. Indeed, several of the names are 'meaningful' in terms of their relationship to repeated narrative themes; e.g. Mucho Mass, Spanish for 'much more', can be read in relationship to the character's condition of schizophrenia, and both his name and his schizophrenia can be read as tropes for what we have discussed as the proliferation of possible meaning in conspiracy, and further as a trope for the interpretive, intersubjective nature of language, all of which Pynchon is explicitly interested in here. Though on the whole, what I wish to point out is the ambiguity of what the names perform. We are inclined (or even encouraged) to look for meaning in them, though we generally only get as far as potential meaning: there are names suggesting other words (Inverarity: in-variety, in-verity, rarity…), sarcastic suggestiveness in calling the lover (Metzger) a meat-man and butcher as well as a baby (Baby Igor), names explicit of female anatomy and hygiene (Fallopian, Koteks), homonyms (Emory Bortz, Genghis Cohen, Chiclitz), and the like. This goes not only for people, but for other proper names as well: the Paranoids, Echo Courts, Yoyodyne, San

[87] An earlier text recognized for its (perhaps more radical) subversion of this plot-system would be Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Narciso, KCUF, Tristero/Trystero, Cosa Nostra, Squamuglia, Faggio, W.A.S.T.E., Inamorati Anonymous, the Alameda County Death Cult (AC-DC), NADA (National Automobile Member's Association). Some of them appear to be more significant, or again at least connected to other overall themes (the Paranoids, for example), than others. They are often suggestive of something else, or saying something else that might be relevant, and then again might not: Yoyodyne, for example, is an autobiographical reference, Pynchon having worked at Rocketdyne, the military-aerospace division of Boeing; KCUF being an anagram for 'fuck' – thus, they are not 'empty' signifiers, they have a referent; but are they significant for the narrative in a capacity other than textual playfulness? I am not proposing that the names act as altogether ambiguous signifiers, nor is this to say that they do not contribute to the overall 'project' of the book, and still less that the book is not offering a coherent and thorough explication of a topic or topics, despite its unconventional approach. Part of this unconventionality may be that we feel encouraged to read the allegorical narrative and the 'story' together, since they seem to be constructed at the same level and intermingled. I say this under the assumption that we are reading a 'story' about conspiracy theory that speaks allegorically ('speaking otherwise') about psychoanalytical issues and communication theory. This is a complex synthesis of disciplines being that they are, from the perspective of conspiracy, rather difficult to separate in the first place. One might say that a narrative on conspiracy is always *a priori* a narrative on psychoanalysis and communication in that it's constitutive elements always include concepts from these two fields (paranoia and 'hidden' information, for example). Likewise, conspiracy is often read through the machinery of psychoanalysis and is inextricably linked to communication and information. Additionally, Pynchon will come right out at times and have a character state the implications of or connections to psychology or information theory. One is not sure whether to say that this is a book about conspiracy, written through the rhetoric of psychology and information/communications theory, or that this is a book about psychology and information/communications theory written through the rhetoric of conspiracy. Though again, this works advantageously for what the book performs (generation of interpretational potential *per se*). In any case, the 'mystery' element of the narrative does not offer itself for resolution as mystery and conspiracy narratives

generally do; that is not the point.[88] Falling into the unavoidable act of interpretation, I am inclined to propose that *Lot 49* is a play on conspiracy and the theoretical concepts central to it, but to use the language of conspiracy, or of investigation into the conspiratorial Other, let's start by asking, 'what are the facts'?

We know that the narrative is constructed around some central concepts and that these concepts are dressed in the garb of conspiracy. Some of them are paranoia, neurosis, hysteria, and communication (information theory and entropy). If we refer once again to the names for a moment, or the character personalities, when we consider them, several are suggestive of psychoanalytical concepts: Oedipa – Oedipus – core complex at the center of all neurosis in Freudian thought; San Narciso – Narcissus – the mirror stage – potentially the Lacanian imaginary; the Paranoids – paranoia; Manny Di Presso - depression; Mike Fallopian, when thought of in connection with the term *uterus*, suggestive of hysteria; Tristero/Trystero, also suggesting depression; Hilarious, Oedipa's analyst, the neurotic psychotic; Inverarity the schizophrenic; Mucho the schizophrenic, and so forth. Although the connection I will want to make with psychoanalytic theory will at first concern itself with the subject, the wall of language, and the Lacanian Other, concepts such as paranoia and the register of the imaginary will be increasingly essential. We will see that the role of information/communications theory, whose prominence in the book I will briefly discuss, is relevant to the Lacanian model (of subject formation) in terms of the role of language in relation to, or in between, the subject and the big Other.[89]

The remainder of our discussion about conspiracy narratives will be primarily structured around the various aspects of Lacanian subject formation, reading conspiracy through some of the concepts we have already discussed, such as language, agency, and manipulation, but recontextualized more fully into the register of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Considering the massive popularity of conspiracy narratives in U.S. culture, both in fiction and in those otherwise generated and circulated in society through a tendency to indulge in conspiracy theories, a psychoanalytical reading of conspiracy

[88] That is not to say that conspiracy narratives are meaningful because they are intended to be resolved, but that they often structurally (and necessarily) offer themselves to the possibility of resolution. There is no conspiracy to contemplate - or conspiring agent - in *Lot 49* at its diegetic level in the way there traditionally is (as in *JFK*, *Arlington Road*, *Manchurian Candidate*, and so forth).
[89] This will also be clearly foregrounded in *Pi* and the *Matrix* films.

will allow us to make some hypotheses about the status of the individual as reflected in these popular narratives.

We will start with a consideration of conspiracy as the 'narrative of the Other', framing the conspired against subject potentially as the Lacanian subject within the symbolic. With Lacan's explanation of the universality of the symbolic order, we can see structural parallels to conspiracy:

> In the symbolic order the totality is called a universe. The symbolic order from the first takes on its universal character. It isn't constituted by a bit. As soon as the symbol arrives, there is a universe of symbols… Everything is ordered in accordance with the symbols which have emerged, in accordance with the symbols once they have appeared. Everything which is human has to be ordained within a universe constituted by the symbolic function.[90]

Here we should recall Žižek's statement that "the retreat of the accepted Big Other accounts for the prevalence of code-cracking in popular culture."[91] When we take this into consideration along with the structure of conspiracy as *langue* (a sign system) and the defining act of encoding all points of signification with a unified coherent meaning (even if only potential) - that is, conspiracy as a grand unified theory - we can postulate a 'missing Other' that the conspired against subject is looking for via conspiracy. With this as our task for the next chapter, we will want to keep in mind the function of the symbolic father, which is "to unite (and not set in opposition) a desire and the Law."[92] By imposing Law upon the subject, the symbolic father intervenes "in the imaginary dual relationship between mother and child," thereby establishing "symbolic distance."[93] We will also want to bear in mind that an absence of the symbolic father, of 'symbolic distance', results in psychosis.

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[90] Lacan, *Book II*, pp. 29.
[91] See page 47.
[92] *Écrits*, pp. 321.
[93] Evans, pp. 62.

Imaginary Fathers or Symbolic mOthers?

> *What psychoanalysis properly concerns itself with are the unexpected consequences of the disintegration of the structures that have traditionally regulated libidinal life. Why does the decline of paternal authority and fixed social and gender roles generate new guilts and anxieties, instead of opening up a brave new world in which we can enjoy shifting and reshaping our multiple identities?*
>
> - Slavoj Žižek, "You May"

Let's start by recalling that a basic part of the structural engagements in conspiracy consists of an individual attempting to engage the big Other - or a representative of the Other's desire. This attempt takes the shape of a seeking out, a search for hidden meaning (an attempt to fill a missing signifier), or, rather bluntly, an attempt to locate an omniscient, omnipotent agent who deliberately organizes the conditions of 'our' lives according to its own needs, or according its own desires. We can see here a potential parallel to the symbolic Other determining the subject's conditions of life - the subject's subjectivity - according to Other desire, which the subject can only (though unconsciously) identify with. But why this 'seeking out'? One possible response would be to say that it is precisely because of the 'not-there-ness' of the representative of Other desire or the symbolic father - paternal authority. If the symbolic father/paternal authority is being sought out, this signals to us that the purpose it serves - the need it fulfills - is not being or has not been fulfilled. Thus we might assume one or more of three things: (1) it serves a necessary function that *only it* can serve, (2) its function has been properly 'supplanted', or (3) too much of it still remains. If we assume the third, then we might conclude that the change (decline of paternal authority and fixed social and gender roles generate) has not been radical enough. To put it another way, we might say that our social structures have been so thoroughly grounded in the principle of paternal authority, that a gradual (as opposed to radical) change in locations of authority, as well as in social (and) gender roles can't but expose fears concerning the loss of stability. That is, we must traverse a period of 'mourning' as opposed to breaking out in a state of celebratory liberation. As Žižek inquires, why is this? What does this tell us? We might posit that *if* paternal authority had been as oppressive as we imagine it to have been, the logical

reaction to its decline would be celebration, 'enjoyment'. Though, on the other hand, who is to say that we do not 'enjoy' oppression? If we conceive of the term 'enjoy' here in the classic Lacanian sense in which it is not simply pleasure, but also in opposition to pleasure, we can see how the restrictive qualities of oppression allow for both the 'un-pleasure' necessary to regeneration of desire (distance from the object of desire), and the pleasure in oppression that allows for a defining of certain borders that may be transgressed (as with Antigone). Once the oppression/oppressor is gone, so is the means of measuring these borders, so is the distance from the (obscene) object of desire, so is the possibility for transgression. In this sense, one would be at a loss to know how to *enjoy oneself*. At what are one's drives to direct themselves? Or, what *Thing* is one's *desire* to aim at? This is not to say that the oppressor is the Thing - *das Ding* - but that through the Oppressor one is pointed in the direction of the Thing because the Thing is what the Oppressor is keeping us at a distance from. The Oppressor is the navigator of our desires in the direction the Thing insofar as it acts as an (agent of) Other (desire). The reason we do not enjoy "shifting and reshaping our multiple identities" is that it offers too much pleasure and not enough enjoyment *precisely because* of the lack of an 'Oppressor'. As Žižek posits, "[p]ublic order is no longer maintained by hierarchy, repression and strict regulation, and therefore is no longer subverted by liberating acts of transgression."[94] All of which brings us to a symptom that manifests itself as a search for the Other (the search is symptomatic of the condition of the individual's awareness of 'something missing' - both an epistemological and ontological crisis). As I have suggested, this indicates a certain dependence on that which is 'no longer there' (though never was to begin with) and, in turn, exposes a desire for stability. Though one should also point out that 'it' was never there to begin with. Again, it is the knowledge, or let's say the *conscious awareness* of this lack (epistemological) that appears to present a problem. That is, *lack* acts as *it*, or in the place of *it* - and *lack*/*it* is a necessary lack,

[94] "You May." The cultural response or 'solution' Žižek posits is that there is a proliferation of "rigidly codified, authoritarian master/slave relationships" in which all parties are free agents, though due to the element of an extreme form of submission, functions like a 'serious game' whereby all participants strictly adhere to the rules, thus allowing for the emergence of the transgressive element NOT because the rules may subsequently broken, but because the *willing* enactment of such severe domination and, importantly, submission is in itself transgressive according to the codex of social interaction (it functions like a "dirty secret").

though one which the individual mistakes as an actual 'something' missing. The *conscious exposure* of the missing *it* gives way to anxiety and a crisis in being (ontological crisis).

This 'search' is both an attempt to legitimate identity/agency and an exposure of threat to these. Though on the other hand, this is not only a potential response symptomatic of this threat ("agency panic"), but a response symptomatic of 'conscious awareness' of the lack of (not lack *in*) a socio-symbolic Other. If we propose a 'disappearance' of the public Father (Law) - Žižek's "disintegration of patriarchal symbolic authority" ("You May") - we might also propose its displacement by conglomerate 'corporations' (which ingest, digest, and incorporate the individual corpus). For a fictional representation of the missing patriarchal symbolic authority pitted against or replaced by conglomerate corporations, we might again turn to Gilliam's *Brazil*.

In *Brazil*, the formula we are presented with is an absent real father, failed symbolic Fathers, a highly sexualized and 'accessible' or permissive maternal body, and a multitude of others, who, in fact, take sexual pleasure in the maternal body. The real father (and thus the castrative 'No!') is conspicuously *in absentia*: he is cursorily mentioned only a couple of times in passing. When what appears to be the head of the massive conglomeration, Mr. Helpmann (Peter Vaughan) tells Sam Lowry that he is willing to help him in any way he can, he explains that Sam's father, despite having been his superior, had been a good friend to him, and says that he keeps "his name [Jeremiah] alive at the office every day. It's as though he's there still speaking to me. 'ere I am, J.H.' [as he says this, he writes in spilt powder on the bathroom sink ERE IAM J.H.] The ghost in the machine." This is an interesting scene in that it is the only time the real father is spoken of at any length, and he is framed as paternal authority to Helpmann, who, though he could potentially stand in as a symbolic Father, is crippled (Sam has just helped him to urinate) and cannot convince Sam to take his proper place in the firm (symbolic) until Sam realizes that it may assist him in finding the woman in his dreams (imaginary). The language with which Helpmann speaks of Sam's father is interesting in its own right: "ere I am," in addition to being a truncated pronunciation of 'there I am', can also mean 'before I am'. With his anagram of Jeremiah, Helpmann points to Jeremiah's potential symbolic Otherness: he is always 'there' for Helpmann, and, as a rule, precedes ('there before') Helpmann. This brief and singular attention on Jeremiah Lowry brings two further points

two our attention: Jeremiah *is not* these things, does not function in this capacity (*there* - the presence of the Law - and *before* - as scriptive authoritative antecedent), for Sam; and Helpmann is an ineffectual *ersatz Vater*, unable to assume the symbolic role of the Father for Sam. An other potential but equally ineffectual symbolic Father would be Sam's immediate superior, Mr. Kurtzmann (Ian Holm), who is clearly more dependant on Sam than Sam is on him and is repeatedly portrayed as assuming a role of authority that he is not actually capable of fulfilling.

The role of the mother is equally inverted. Along with the real father, the maternal body is also 'gone', but it has 'disappeared' as a result of being all too accessible. We should keep in mind here that a function of the father is to distance or detach the child from the imaginary, dualistic relation to the mother. With the father missing, the mother becomes overwhelmingly near. We should also keep in mind the role of the symbolic mother. The symbolic mother brings the child into language by functioning as an initial location of 'symbolization'. This happens at two levels. First, it is through separation from the mother's breast that the child symbolizes her (presence) through representation, through language, creating an image of her *in absentia*. This constitutes the child's initial entry into the symbolic. Next, the mother ascribes meaning or interprets the child's screams. In *Brazil*, with the father 'missing', a *permissive* maternal body here replaces the symbolic maternal body; and where the authorship the mother provides as originary representation through real inaccessibility, as that which is forbidden, Mrs. Lowry (Katherine Helmond) incorporates a polymorphous, perversely accessible ('maternal') body: She spends a majority of her time in the company of her plastic surgeon, who himself has a type of (polymorphous) perverse access to her body in that he is continually penetrating it at various locations and manipulating the body, transforming the whole of it into a highly sexualized topography intended for pleasure. We might say that the manipulation of this body finds itself in the service of enjoyment *and* pleasure. The surgery performed stands in as a trope for some real physical *jouissance*. In this continual cutting of the body, which kills the old body, cuts it away, the body literally suffers. At the same time, the motivation at the root of this self-willed suffering is a continual desire for a body that does not lose its capacity to receive and give pleasure. We might also say this is a desire to *embody* (to give body to) the object of desire. This 'desire' and

jouissance give rise to a body of pleasure. Thus this body both enjoys and pleasures. Not incidentally, mother Lowry continually signals her *use for pleasure* to *others* (mirrors) of the son.

In this respect, along with the missing real father and lacking symbolic castration, the 'son' is 'encouraged' toward imaginary relationships. He is not provided the structure for proper entry into the symbolic, but is rather helped to adhere to the dualistic, untriangulated imaginary. Supplementing this kind of structuring is the omni-presence of the corporation, in which there is relatively little hierarchy and a proliferation of others.[95]

Another text that addresses itself to the conspicuous absence of symbolic Mothers and Fathers is David Fincher's *Fight Club*.[96] Where are the Mothers and Fathers in this narrative? We have some early reference to what has become of them when Jack (Edward Norton) first visits the self-help groups: men with 'no balls' or emasculated (testicular cancer) and emaciated women who can't "get laid"; or to put it more bluntly, men who can't inseminate and women who can't conceive - impossible parents. Thus from the outset, *Fight Club* proposes that Mothers and Fathers are already gone, out of the picture, which must also say something about the state of the individual from the outset as well: if the parents are missing, then a progression of logic tells us that, at the location of son/daughter, the subject is a void (a cipher). This very conclusion is concisely put forth when Tyler (Brad Pitt) professes to the men of Fight Club: "We're the middle children of history man. No purpose or place. We have no great war, no great depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives." And right on cue to the implied question of 'where are our Fathers'? ('where has our ideological heritage left us?') Lou, a potential representative of paternal (castrative) authority, enters the basement, chiding the 'lost children'. For what? Literally for being where they are, and shouldn't be. He demands, by force of violence, that they evacuate his premises. His authority, though, is

[95] Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* offers an exemplary portrayal of the de-structive capacity of corporate life. Patrick Bateman, a young and successful corporate employee, is portrayed as continually splitting and regenerating in *other* manifestations. He is framed within a landscape populated by corporate doppelgangers, and is depicted as psychotically schizophrenic, inhering to an imaginary space of multiple egos. Ellis exposes the de-structive, subject/symbolic-threatening capacity the Corporation embodies in its hierarchy-weak encouragement of imaginary inherence by portraying Bateman as a real threat to the socio-symbolic community (as well as a potentially real physical threat).

[96] Based on the Chuck Palahniuk book of the same title.

subverted through the same means with which he has threatened the 'children', and by which the characters of the film stake their 'claim' to some sort of self realization, or self realized 'subjectivity': through violence, but inverted, so to speak. Tyler lets himself be beaten, even encouraging it, until he is a bloody mess, then throws himself onto Lou, begging to be allowed to use Lou's bar's basement space for Fight Club. Lou is appalled, frightened, and acquiesces, fleeing the location which belongs to him in horror. In this respect, he is only another ineffectual father who runs out on the seen of the family.

This is reenacted shortly afterward when Jack goes to his boss' office (on the command that each member of Fight Club start a fight with someone the following week, and lose), beats *himself* bloody, frames his boss, and thus manages to extort his monthly wages from his employer without having to go to work any longer. Again, by 'letting' himself be beaten, he gets precisely what he wants, and manages to 'emasculate' (compromise the castrative authority of) the symbolic Father in the process. And not unlike the previous scene, this is done by a process of inversion: instead of his superior imposing his authority by firing Jack, which he threatens to do as the scene opens, Jack exposes him as fraudulent and threatens the security of his superior's position. Additionally, as opposed to being fired, Jack orchestrates an outcome in which he *chooses* not to work, but is nevertheless still employed and remains on the payroll: "Under and behind and inside everything this man took for granted, something horrible had been growing. And right then at our most excellent moment together; telephone, computer, fax machine, 52 weekly paychecks…"

In each of these examples, an embodiment of potential paternal authority (a representative of the Law) is exposed as being fraudulent ('phallible') in function. The film frames fathers/Fathers as simply no longer there. They have become mere shells of a debunked 'convention'. The film offers an illustration of how we are forced to rethink traditional social symbolic roles because we feel they have failed us. In addition to these failed 'stand-ins' of paternal authority (Lou, Jack's boss), we have father's who walk out on their responsibilities, or simply can't offer answers that are any longer meaningful. Both of these conditions are exposed early on in the film when Tyler and the narrator (Jack) begin to discuss precisely that which initiates their 'liberation': fighting.

Tyler: If you could fight anyone, who would you fight?
Narrator: I'd fight my boss, probably. Why, who'd you fight?
Tyler (speaks as if stating the obvious): I'd fight my dad.
Narrator: I don't know my dad. I mean, I know him, but he left when I was six years old. Married this other woman, had a lot of kids. He like did this every six years: goes to a new city and starts a new family.
Tyler: Fucker's settin' up franchises. My dad never went to college, so it was real important that I go.
Narrator: Sounds familiar.
Tyler: So I graduate, I call him up long distance, I said, 'dad, now what?' He says, 'Get a job.'
Narrator: Same here.
Tyler: Now I'm 25 five. I make my yearly call again, say, 'dad, now what?' He says, 'I don't know. Get married.'

It is not just the fraudulent father who is exposed here, but entire social institutions (the fraudulent Father): education, labor, marriage, family. The logic called into question is that of the (domestic) capitalist/consumer: one is educated, which consists, primarily, of social training that enables you join the workforce. One joins the workforce, and one gets married. What the dialogue underlines is, why have these processes lost their meaningfulness? Or, where do they lead? The answer comes at the end: to the same place we find our ineffectual fathers, who have gone to school, worked their jobs, gotten married, had children, and subsequently dropped out of this ideological trajectory at the end, having found it unfulfilling. What Jack and Tyler represent is a refusal to repeat their fathers' narratives; a rejection of the entire ideology of domesticating capitalism and coupling.

Coupling, by its very nature, is domesticating; but capitalism? If we go back to Melley's concept of agency panic, we will remember that one of the core causes is that, in late capitalism, large corporations do not differentiate individuals, that the individual becomes lost in the conglomerate. Interestingly, he states, “the prescription for ailing individual agency in America is nothing so much as a healthy dose of masculinity.”[97] This is precisely the same proposition *Fight Club* makes. It rejects domesticating institutions, blowing up stores and corporate buildings, tearing at the conventions of capitalism and thus framing consumerism as domesticating agent or symptom of domestication: (Tyler) "Why do guys like you and I know what a duvet is? Is this essential, in the hunter-gatherer sense of the word? No. What are we then?" Jack

[97] P. 57

responds, "Consumers." Logically, the narrative also calls into question the domesticating role of Woman/Wife/Mother:

> Narrator: I don't know. Ya can't get married. I'm a thirty-year-old boy.[98]
> Tyler: We're a generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need.

That is, where fathers have failed in providing models of paternal authority, mothers can equally not teach their boys how to be men. As we can see, what is called into question is the institution of family itself, and with it, the symbolic roles of Father and Mother. Here we see a link between the rise of corporate capitalism, or consumer culture, socio-psychologically, to the disappearance of the Law giving paternal authority of the Father and (not mutually exclusive) the loss of the Maternal Body (mOther), and subsequently to an investiture of desire in commodities. One might posit here that without the castrative Law to regulate desire, the maternal body also cannot fulfill its function in helping to properly shape desire within the subject. Another central task in *Fight Club*'s narrative is to point out this (misguided) investiture: "You are not your job. You're not how much money you have in the bank. You're not the car you drive. You're not the contents of your wallet. You're not your fucking khakis." Having called all of these things (and more) into question, at the core of the film's narrative is the question *what now?* To answer this, we will first want to analyze the symptoms such narratives expose, or read these narratives themselves as symptoms, and determine how the structures that regulate desire and determine Law are depicted. We might ask what the function of conspiracy narratives is in response to these Mothers and Fathers who are 'missing in action', so to speak? How do conspiracy narratives frame the subject/Other 'relationship'? What are the roles of lack, desire, and jouissance in conspiracy?

[98] We also witness the same thirty-year-old boy who can't get married in Frankenheimer's *Manchurian Candidate*. Here too the father is missing.

Jouissance: Where too much of a 'good thing' will get you

> *The repetition of symbols was to be enough, without trauma as well perhaps to attenuate it or even jar it altogether loose from her memory. She was meant to remember. She faced that possibility as she might the toy street from a high balcony, roller-coaster ride, feeding-time among the beasts in the zoo – any death-wish that can be consummated by some minimum gesture. She touched the edge of its voluptuous field, knowing it would be lovely beyond dreams simply to submit to it; that not gravity's pull, laws of ballistics, feral ravening, promised more delight. She tested it shivering: I am meant to remember. Each clue that comes is supposed to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the gemlike 'clues' were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night.*[99]

In the above quote from Pynchon's *Lot 49*, we can tease out precisely what is at stake in too ardent a move to fill the missing signifier. The context of the passage is our protagonist, Oedipa, wandering the city streets, contemplating her life and finding symbols (the muted post horn) related to the conspiracy (the Trystero) she is attempting to uncover. Through her excursions, she finds the sign everywhere, and eventually tells herself, "It was enough, a coded warning. What, tonight, was chance?"[100] That is to say, each clue has a specific and purposeful meaning in relation to the whole, that contingency and chance are not factors here. At the same time, her deliberations equally expose the danger in giving each clue "its own clarity" and "permanence." In this passage, the 'temptation' to fill gaps in the signifying chain in this manner is like a "death-wish," the "knowing" of which would be "lovely beyond dreams simply to submit to," more so than "feral ravening" or the "laws of ballistics." If we plug certain terminology back in here, exchanging 'death drive' for "death-wish," we then find ourselves in a Lacanian reading of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. For Freud, the death drive is an impetus which pushes us over the trajectory of desire. Where desire is (aimed at) that which we are lacking, that *part of us that is missing*, which would complete us, and the status of its missing-ness is equal to being alive. To put this another way, rather simplified, that which 'completes' us in life is death, because it is in death that nothing is lacking, and is the location life is continually moving toward. It is the end of the symbolic, and the reemergence of/into the real. The last two sentences of the quote give a nod in this

[99] *The Crying of Lot 49*, pp. 80.
[100] Pp. 83.

(explicitly Lacanian) direction: the 'clues' Oedipa constantly encounters are "compensation." They are compensation for the Thing - *das Ding* - itself; that is, they are words, objects only bearing symbolic meaning. And words, as we know, do make up for "having lost the direct, epileptic Word." The "Word" here is not the word as we know it, an arbitrary label. It is the word that Stillman senior in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* is in search of, it is the impossible word in the prelapsarian Garden myth, with its direct access to its object, it is the "epileptic Word." As Martin Klepper suggests, Stillman's search is "Die Suche nach der puren Sprache, einer Sprache…in der Signifikant und Signifikant noch nicht getrennt sind…"[101] It is a search for the word that is not a word, but rather the Thing itself. The difference between the word and the thing is not an opposition, but is rather the difference that links the real and the symbolic. We might say that the link here is precisely a missing link. Where the presence of the word provides a relation to the thing, access to the real of the thing is impossible insofar as our understanding of the thing is based on a certain distance to it. *Thingness* would entail an unconscious state of being the thing (I am *it*, though I am unaware of my very *it-ness*). This distance, which allows for conception, and from which springs forth language, is the gap in the signifying chain itself. To fill this gap in a *real* sense, in a strict sense, equals real death, for it is in death that the chain of signification is complete. What we see played though in conspiracy is, as we have said, the attempt to fill the missing signifier with meaning and cover over its lack. In so doing, it is not necessarily real death that the individual achieves (and it is not a real bridging of the gap that is the missing signifier), but, as I have suggested, when the individual too ardently attempts to fill the missing signifier (lack), inscribing it her/himself with meaning, the individual is 'sucked out of' the symbolic and 'stuck to' the imaginary, where it adheres to its 'external' inscriptions, its externalized specular self.[102] The danger here is that the individual projects its fantasy over lack, onto gaps in the chain of signification. This is, on the one hand, a process necessary for making meaning. On the other hand, mediation 'makes all the difference'.

[101] *Pynchon, Auster, DeLillo*; pp. 252.
[102] We can supplement this proposal with the condition of subjectivity in which, if the subject does not renounce the *jouissance* of attempting to act in the place of the imaginary phallus for the mother (which is anyway impossible) and accept castration, it remains in the dualistic realm of the imaginary without access to the symbolic.

The danger is that such a projection go unmediated by the desire of the Other, and in so doing remain dualistically phantasmatic and imaginary.

Three narratives stemming in large part from Dick's *Time Out Of Joint* (1959) and Daniel Galouye's *Simulacron Three* (1964), illustrate such an attempt rather well. *The Truman Show*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, and *The Matrix* can all be read in terms of a *need to know*; that is, a need to fill a gap (lack) or gaps in a signifying chain. This need to fill a gap in meaning is here enacted as *jouissance* - the (destructive/painful) enjoyment of engaging beyond boarders, beyond the boarders of pleasure, strictly speaking; the pleasure principle upholds the gap of desire, allowing for the perpetual regeneration of pleasure, where *jouissance* pushes over into or *beyond* the gap, transforming pleasure into 'pleasurable pain'.[103] *The Truman Show* and *The Thirteenth Floor* take this, unlike many conspiracy narratives, to its 'resolution' by going to the outermost boarder of its structural possibilities, the final boarder (imaginarily filling the gap of the missing signifier), and thus bringing the narrative to its expiration (death).[104] Conspiracy must continually ask questions and generate possibilities or possible meaning without end. We can read conspiracy as symptomatic of an epistemological crisis concerning lack. The (conscious) knowledge of lack shocks the subject of conspiracy into a panic where they feel compelled to 'cover' the lack. From the point of view of the subject, the attempt is to extract meaning, though 'extracting' meaning is always constituted by 'covering' the gap of missing signifier. Still, for conspiracy to remain 'in play', it is necessary to perpetually expose new locations of lack, new gaps in the signifying chain. The functionality of conspiracy is absolutely dependant on the structural element of lack - the 'element' around which it (conspiracy, like desire) structures itself. Once a conclusive verdict is assigned to a 'plot', the conspiracy is exposed, thus losing its defining characteristic, and engagement with the conspiratorial other/Other, with the conspiracy itself, is no longer possible.[105]

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[103] Thus, if we read conspiracy theories as a symptomatic response to a crisis in agency/identity, the act of continual interpretation, of attempting to 'fill' the missing signifier, should be read as the enjoyment (*jouissance*) of this symptom, though in some of these narratives, we will eventually find ourselves *beyond the pleasure principle* and at a location of symbolic death.

[104] Whereas conspiracy narratives generally are not 'resolved', but rather are amorphous and require continual interpretation and integration of disparate narratives: they allow for continual enjoyment.

[105] I interchange *other* and *Other* here because, in terms of exposing the conspiratorial agent, the outcome is the same for both - the narrative reaches its structural conclusion.

There are two potential ‘conclusions’ I have in mind here: the more common being, like in *The Truman Show* and *The Thirteenth Floor*, one in which the logic of the narrative closes and the only potential extension of the narrative would be a repetition of the narrative; or, on the other hand, one which proposes entry into healthy symbolic relations (*The Game*, *Fight Club* - both Fincher films). In any case, engaging/exposing the conspiratorial other/Other is always terminal; the 'subject' in question expires (or, as in *The Game* and *Fight Club*, actually becomes a proper subject, or a 'new' subject) here in that his interpellative machinery/narratives dissolve. Thus, either new narratives ensue, replacing old ones, or one returns to the beginning, repeating the same narratives. Within the framework of bringing a conspiracy to its end (‘exposing’ the conspiratorial Other), we might also instructively read the conspiratorial Other (or *other*, as the case may be) as/like the maternal body, and where symbolic castration is missing, the individual ‘enjoys’ as much as possible, thereby resulting in dissolution of *the* Object of Desire through indulgence and subsequently the dissolution of the subject himself (the subject in relation to its defining principle). As we know, desire is rooted in a necessary distance to its object. The object may only be 'joyed' in at a distance, based in its lack. In the narratives to be considered here, the main character discovers a ‘real’ conspiratorial agent and destroys it either through a physical agency (*The Thirteenth Floor*: the protagonist apparently exits the constructed worlds he has been moving within and kills the threatening conspiratorial agent) or otherwise through an act of negation, by 'turning its back' on the conspiratorial universe and thus denying it existence (*Truman*). One might also argue that *The Matrix* does this as well, or ends by stating that it intends to, though we will see that the 'intention' of the 'subject' differs vastly from the first installment of the trilogy to the last. *Truman* and *Thirteenth Floor* are optimistic narratives in that, once they realize that the narrative must end at this ‘outermost boarder’, that the story is *over*, they posit the beginning of new 'happy' narratives that appear to consist in proper entry into symbolic relations. Beyond the boundaries of the simulated computer-worlds in *Thirteenth Floor*, Hannon Fuller (Craig Bierko) meets the promise of ‘true love’ and integration into a harmonious family community (symbolic), at which point the film ends. When Truman (Jim Carry) leaves his bubble-world for the ‘real’ world, there is also the promise of ‘true love’: Sylvia/Lauren Garland (Natasha McElhone), Truman’s *first and*

forbidden love interest is shown rushing from her apartment to meet him as he enters the 'real world' (that is, symbolic, as opposed to imaginary) for the first time.

If we are tempted at first to read these as signaling a move from the imaginary into to a proper symbolic, into proper symbolic relations, we should be weary of this initial impulse. In the 'outer world' of the *Thirteenth Floor*, the characters are retroactively recycled – that is, they are the same characters that are found within the simulated worlds, only they are now framed as the 'originals', a move back to which is already impossible - or at least highly questionable - after simulation. The simulated worlds Fuller experiences are so 'authentic', that he can't actually tell the difference between the various worlds. The only assurance he has of being in a simulation is when he actually inserts himself into one. On the other hand, there is no assurance of being in the 'real' world. Thus, there is always the potential of coming again to the realization that what you though was the real world is only one of several simulations. Additionally, the depiction of this final 'outer world' is a utopic one in which the threatening other (the other, 'bad', husband) is eliminated, the big Other is physically present (the father of his wife-to-be, who acted as his friend and mentor in the simulated worlds, and is framed here as Father) and benevolent, all set within an idyllic futuristic landscape. That is to say, this utopia is, like all utopias, equally 'imaginary'.

Similarly, in *The Truman Show*, when Truman is making his final attempt to flee the fabricated/simulated world constructed by Christof, we see him in a boat sailing out into the distance, at the boarder of which he will discover a wall, a flight of steps, and a door to the other side. While on the boat, he removes a picture from his pocket which is also a simulation or reconstruction of sorts. During his time in college, Truman falls in love for what we presume is the first time with Lauren Garland, a girl who, in a castrative gesture, he is forbidden to see and who is finally removed from the set of the show (from what Truman has access to). She warns him on their final meeting that he is living within a construct of which he is the center and that it is all a giant TV set where everyone knows everything he does; and she tells him her *real name* (Sylvia). With this and their brief encounter, Truman reserves a memory of her as an ideal - an ideal of love and authenticity. The picture he has of her while on the boat is a collage he put together from various magazines and consists of torn facial features he thinks represent those of Sylvia.

As the world he has lived in all his life becomes increasingly destabilized and as his marriage becomes increasingly dissatisfying, he increasingly indulges in his (always reconstructed) memories of Sylvia and the fantasy of meeting her again. That is to say, what is signaled as potentially 'waiting for him' on the outside, the next narrative, so to speak, is also based on an imaginary construction: an original *forbidden* love from within the imaginary (the Truman *set*), who becomes inaccessible in order for Truman to establish 'normal' love relations.[106] These narratives must end here because of the inherent threat of repetition of the narrative: to tell the 'love story' that is suggested at the end of each film would mean retelling these same narratives on some level. We would be at the start of a love story that has already started and ended, first of all. Next, what is played through here is a period of trials or tasks the subject must pass through before he 'gets the girl'. These trials are largely representative of the antagonisms inherent to relationships (questions of verity, of fidelity…), and thus upon entering into these relationships (again), the subject stands before the very same trials. Furthermore, as I have tried to illustrate, to tell the love story implicit at the end of each narrative would be a 'move' from one imaginary location to another imaginary (Truman's re/construction of Silvia as a fantasy), and thus more of a repetition than a move in a new direction. By ending where they do, just at the beginning of some 'perfect' prospect of love, the narratives adhere again to the possibility of utopia (which, by definition, are impossible), where 'ultimate' wishes or desires are fulfilled. But as we know, in such a structure there is 'too much' jouissance: the characters complete the signifying chain and are thus expunged from the wor(l)d.[107]

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[106] We have to categorize the Truman set as imaginary because, as we are told, it is constructed using the model of an ideal from his youth.

[107] *The Matrix* also ends ambiguously in this manner: it dresses itself in optimism ('I am free and I will show all the others what it means to be free, thereby perpetuating Your – my oppressor's - downfall'), though the promise of the potential narrative to follow is inscribed with the problems inherent to life within the 'fake' conspiratorial community. It is precisely this – that there can be no utopia, that one is doomed to the repetition of one's narratives – that is picked up in *Matrix Reloaded* and which is 'resolved' in final segment of the trilogy. The phantasmic, utopic nature of the end of the first installment is suggested in the closing scene: Neo calls into the system and says, "I'm going to show these people…a world without you, a world without rules and controls, without boarders or boundaries, a world where anything is possible." While he is speaking, we have a continual close up of the phrase "system failure." It of course refers to a disruptive anomaly in the system, but it also already suggests that adherence to an imaginary fantasy of utopia is a system failure in relation to the symbolic order.

Wo Es War

Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* consists of three stories that are highly similar in structure and theme. The plots are constructed around an individual who finds himself confronted by a certain task. The more the individual engages this task, the more he is confounded by it and the more his surroundings take on a conspiratorial aspect. Most poignant, perhaps, is that engagement in the task results in a destabilization of the individual's sense of self. We continually witness the individual in explicitly 'Lacanian moments' or situations, having to address questions of his own subjectivity, (symbolic) mandates, finding himself in uncannily familiar mirror spaces where an other individual effectively *equals* himself, or where specters from his past come back to haunt him.

In "City of Glass," the first and longest of the stories, a character named Quinn, who writes under the pen name William Wilson, becomes accidentally mixed up in a case of missing persons. A stranger calls his house looking for a detective named Paul Auster. At first, Quinn is abrupt with the stranger, but later regrets this, and when the stranger calls again Quinn assumes the identity of Paul Auster, detective. What we are made aware of right from the start is that we are reading a story about identity; in particular, about doppelgangers, specters, multiple identities compounded in one individual (schizophrenia), and adherence to dyadic imaginary relations/space - identity in crisis. This is signaled initially in the reference to Poe's tale of haunting doppelgangers, "William Wilson," and the fact that this is the *assumed name* of our protagonist. Likewise, Poe's story states in the beginning that William Wilson is the assumed (pen) name of the narrator.[108] As the tale progresses we witness an unfolding of the spectral nature of a character's split identity, how he is haunted by his *other* self, finally exposed by and as a mirror.[109] Within the first few pages of the Auster text, the narrator takes on

[108] "Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. The fair page now lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation." (Pp. 1).

[109] It is worth pointing out that Poe's tale is expressly concerned with a compromise in agency regulated, or imposed, by the mirror self (the imaginary): "Poor indemnity for natural rights of self-agency so perniciously, so insultingly denied!" (Pp. 18). Here, we can see that Poe has read both his Freud and Lacan: the tale suggests the 'oppressive' limiting capacity of the super-ego as controlling social factor for the individual within society; but also that a dyadic adherence to fantasy space excludes the individual from the

several identities: Quinn, William Wilson, Paul Auster, Max Work. More than assumed names, these *are* different identities: Quinn is framed as the 'actual' individual in question; William Wilson, his pen name; Paul Auster, a detective; Max Work, the protagonist of Quinn's books, and also a detective. And as if that weren't enough, we again find doublings within this set of identities: Wilson and Quinn are writers; Work and Auster are detectives. As the story develops, Quinn will identify most strongly with his assumed identity, Paul Auster, who, in turn, he has an idea of how to emulate due to his fictional creation of the detective Max Work - 'what would Work do…' In this sense, his identity is constituted by a fiction based on a fiction. Though the story clearly has more to do with imaginary others, mirrors to the self, than symbolic Others, several passages help illuminate precisely what is at stake in any Lacanian notion of identity and the big Other.

After having lost track of Stillman senior, who Quinn as Auster has been commissioned to monitor, and he is no longer able to contact Virginia Stillman by phone, Quinn wanders through the city for a while before sitting down and writing in his notebook. He writes of the different people he sees in the city, but mostly of the beggars and homeless (which he himself will soon be). Then, what seems all of a sudden, he writes "Baudelaire: Il me semble que je serais toujours bien là où je ne suis pas. In other words: It seems to me that I will always be happy in the place where I am not. Or, more bluntly: Wherever I am not is the place where I am myself" (p.110). What is being described here is the nature of the subject's fundamental displacement in relation to *objet petit a* (as object-cause, or that which sets desire in motion), the function of lack, or Freud's (as read by Lacan) "*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*." The reference is reinforced on the following page, when Quinn is pondering 'fate':

> Fate in the sense of what was, of what happened to be. It was something like the word 'it' in the phrase 'it is raining' or 'it is night'. What that 'it' referred to Quinn had never known. A generalized condition of things as they were, perhaps; the state of is-ness that is the ground on which the happenings of the world took place. He could not be any more definite than that. But perhaps he was not really searching for anything definite.

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symbolic. The imaginary "relates specifically to the dual relation between the ego and the specular image" (Evans, 82).

While foregrounding ‘it’ here as a “general condition of things as they were,” the last sentence about Quinn's searching for not “anything definite” might initially appear to stand somewhat in opposition. It frames ‘it’ - the "condition of things as they were" - as ‘not anything definite’. This is, though, what is intended in Lacan’s reading of *wo Es war*: something that is defining and *necessarily not definite* (in the sense of being ‘of the finite’: L. *definitus*: distinct, precise, bound, limited), but rather based in lack.

In reading this 'it' in relation to fate, as Auster put it, and mapping it back onto this 'nothing definite' location where I both am and am not at the same time - or, I am precisely where I am not - we are beginning to get a picture of the subject as defined through the lack in the Other. This 'nothing definite' of the Other, that impenetrable kernel the subject will most intimately wind itself around is "where I am myself." That is to say, what defines the subject is the location in the Other that will always remain a mystery to the Subject, both foreign in its ultimate inaccessibility and familiar in ever-presence.

In the last of the three stories, the narrator (who is in the relative position of Quinn) says of Fanshawe (who has distinctly Other qualities): “He was a ghost I carried around inside me” (200). Relating this back to desire and the Other, we would say that there is some intangible kernel in the Other transposed into the subject that acts as a guiding principle from 'within', despite its intangibility (or inaccessibility), and is thus ghost-like. With *wo Es war* in mind, we might call this kernel the 'it' of the Other, the Other's desire. It is in this sense that the it of the Other takes on its defining properties: 'where It was, I should become'. Or, as Bruce Fink puts it, "I must come to be where foreign forces - the Other as language and the Other as desire - once dominated;"[110] and "I must become I where 'it' was or reigned."[111] As Lacan points out and Fink brings our attention back to, this 'it' is "not the id per se - for Freud says neither *das Es* nor *das Ich* here, as he usually does when designating the agencies of the id and the ego."[112] What we also want to note here is that, in Freud's statement that becomes central for Lacan, we do not read '*wo Es war, soll Ich sein*' - *I* should *be* where *it* was - but rather, I should *become* where it was - *wo Es war, soll Ich werden*. In this sense, it is never really a question of arrival, but rather

[110] *The Lacanian Subject*, pp. 68.
[111] Evans, pp. 46.
[112] Ibid.

always a question of becoming. Why is this important? Because the idea of arrival is based in finitude and some tangible definiteness, and this is not the nature of Other desire. Thus, in 'being' actually being a constant process of 'becoming' - the subject circles around a lack in the Other - the subject is in fact always where s/he is not, never being able to arrive at what lacks ("*es*") in the Other, but none the less always 'becoming' or being defined by (around) the lack in the Other. Here we might initially posit a structural parallel to conspiracy in that it must always generate new possibilities, never arriving at the source - the conspiratorial Agent - otherwise the conspired against subject *falls out of being*. It is precisely this circling around a *lack* that gives body to the *subject*.

Lack and Desire

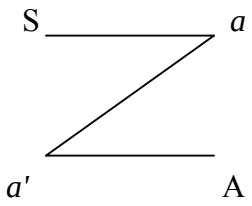
In "Ghosts," the second story of Auster's *New York Trilogy*, the protagonist, Blue, is hired by White (who remains unseen/unknown) to monitor Black. The following passage from "Ghosts" lends itself to two possible readings:

> Having penetrated Black's room and stood there alone, having been, so to speak, in the sanctum of Black's solitude, he cannot respond to the darkness of that moment except by replacing it with a solitude of his own. To enter Black, then, was the equivalent of entering himself, and once inside himself, he can no longer conceive of being anywhere else. *But this is precisely where Black is, even though Blue does not know it.*[113]

What presents itself as most obvious throughout this story is Black's specular and phantasmatic imaginary or other qualities: Black is a mirror for Blue, and thus has the characteristics of the specular other. As Martin Klepper suggests, "die Beobachtung von Black wird immer mehr zur Selbstbeobachtung."[114] Curiously, he also at times has distinctly Other qualities. For example, despite the fact that a subject can never actually 'penetrate' the innermost space of the Other (but should rather find itself in the location of the Other - the language of the symbolic), Blue's response to being in "the sanctum of Black's solitude" ends with the logic that Black is precisely within Blue, yet without

[113] P. 191. Italics mine.
[114] *Pynchon, Auster, DeLillo*; pp. 268.

Blue's knowing it.[115] This should be how the Other functions, 'secretly' manifesting itself at the very core of the subject. On the other hand, we cannot get around the fact that Black acts as a mirror. Perhaps there is, though, a way to reconcile these two distinct function-locations of the other and the Other here.



If we consider Lacan's (simplified) schema L, we can get an idea of the positions involved. In the upper left corner, we find the location of the subject (S), across from which is the ego as it is related to an other - that is, in the sense of self resulting from identification with an other, specular image (*a*); at the bottom left corner, we find the location of an other (*a'*), across from which we find the location of the big Other. As Dylan Evans points out, "the main point of the schema is to demonstrate that the symbolic relation (between the Other and the subject) is always blocked to a certain extent by the imaginary axis (between the ego and the specular image)." To put this another way, the subject 'has access to' the big Other through the imaginary medium of others. Thus, even as the ego-other (the specular image of the self) is based on an external specular model that acts as a mirror - an other - it is through this little other that the big Other 'speaks' its desires, albeit in an inverted or 'interrupted' manner. The point of Blue's incursion into the 'inner sanctum' of Black is to provide Blue with a certain access to himself. It is here that he will encounter (unaware) that which is himself and yet more than himself: some 'external' kernel which his own inner kernel equally consists in - the Other's desire.

If "Ghosts" is constructed around a primarily imaginary model, then it is in the third story, appropriately titled "The Locked Room," that we are more clearly dealing with a model of an Other:

[115] Commenting on Ben Sachs in Auster's *Leviathan*, and equally what is at stake in Blue's relationship to Black, Martin Klepper notes: "Die Suche nach dem Anderen draussen…ist dabei immer gleichzeitig eine Reise ins Innere, eine Suche nach der eigenen Identität…" (*Pynchon, Auster, DeLillo*; pp. 251).

> Fanshawe stood apart from us, and yet he was the one who held us together… He was there for you, and yet at the same time he was inaccessible. You felt there was a secret core in him that could never be penetrated, a mysterious centre of hiddenness. To imitate him was somehow to participate in that mystery, but it was also to understand that you could never really know him.
>
> I would get so close to Fanshawe, would admire him so intensely, would want so desperately to measure up to him – and then, suddenly, a moment would come when I realized that he was alien to me.[116]

The preceding two passages are rather explicit in terms of the character Fanshawe's Otherness, with his "secret core," his "mysterious center of hiddenness," and his ultimate alienness. What is of equal significance in this character is the impression he has left as an individual of indelible authority. He was always more capable than others, always knew what the (morally) right thing to do was, and, for the narrator of the tale, always acted as some infallible model of perfection, as a guiding principle. In being a guiding (Other) principle, the attributes we've named above are of central import. One imitated him, and thus communed in some sort of 'mystery'. Thus, he determines the actions of those 'around' him, though this communion always remained a mystery at its center, an impenetrable kernel that one "could never really know," a "secret core" one cannot but continually circle around. The second passage also offers an explicit if blunt idea of the extimate quality of the Other/the Other's desire: one imitates and integrates this 'external thing', though even in this integration, there always remains this inaccessible core, this ultimate alienness at the innermost core (again, "wherever I am not is the place where I am myself;" extimate).

In contrast to the scene in which Blue gains this mysterious access to himself through access to Black, and in concord with the idea of an inaccessible core, the following passage points us in the direction of what this Other extimate kernel means for the subject, where it leads the subject:

> Every life is inexplicable… No matter how many facts are told, no matter how many details are given, the essential thing resists telling… We all want to be told stories, and we listen to them in the same way we did when we were young. We imagine the real story inside the

[116] Pp. 210 and 212, respectively.

> words, and to do this we substitute ourselves for the person inside the story, pretending that we can understand him because we understand ourselves. This is a deception. We exist for ourselves, perhaps, and at times we even have a glimmer of who we are, but in the end, we can never be sure, and as our lives go on, we become more and more opaque to ourselves, more and more aware of our own incoherence. No one can cross the boundary into another – for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself.[117]

What can this tell us about the extimate core of the subject, the lack and desire of the Other? That there is something at the 'center' of the subject which has been forgone. Or to put it another way, it is precisely the center of the subject that has been forgone (and thus the subject's decentering). Though again, this should not be viewed as a hollowing, as a threat to the subject, but rather as constitutive of the subject. According to Lacan, there is a necessary 'choice' involved in this 'process'. It is the choice the subject makes in favor of the Other's desire, and thereby in favor of its own subjectivity. This choice for the Other's desire at the expense of one's self, as we have already discussed, is a choice which includes a certain sacrifice, but a necessary sacrifice in order for the subject to emerge.

In "The Locked Room," when considering what managing Fanshawe's writing means to him, the narrator thinks to himself, "I had stumbled onto a cause, a thing that justified me and made me feel important, and the more fully I disappeared into my ambitions for Fanshawe, the more sharply I came into focus for myself" (231). This can be illustrative of how 'choosing' the Other is in fact a choice of freedom, not only in that one is 'free' to choose, but also in that gaining subjectivity allows you to be 'free' to perform (within) the will of the Other as if it were one's own: "Given the strain of reconciling myself to the project, it was probably necessary for me to equate Fanshawe's success with my own" (231). Also in this respect: "The true test, after all, is to be like everyone else. Once that happens, he no longer has to question his singularity. *He is free – not only of others, but of himself*" (273, italics mine).

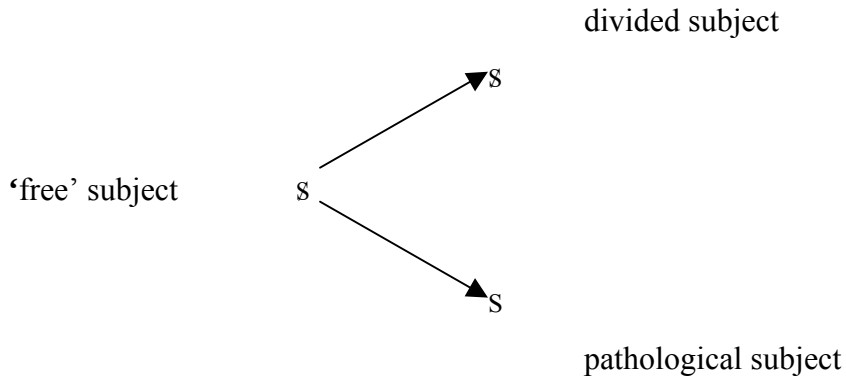
[117] Pp. 247

Lacan's *Vel* and Determinism

> *…when he was able to think about things that happened to him, he would conclude that nothing was real except chance. But that was much later. In the beginning, there was simply the event and its consequences. Whether it might have turned out differently, or whether it was all predetermined with the first* word *that came from the stranger's mouth, is not the question.*
>
> - Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*

To help illuminate the question of chance, choice, and determinism, let's consider another work of fiction in which the question of determinism and choice acts as the narrative's central philosophical inquiry. In *Matrix Reloaded*, during the initial exchange between Morpheus and the Merovingian, we find that Morpheus believes in choice ("everything begins with choice"), as opposed to chance or causality, though at the same time he believes in predetermination. Morpheus' belief in choice *and* determinism is interesting in that the co-incidence of the two is not unlike the structure of Lacan's *Vel* ('either/or') of alienation, in which the events leading to the advent of the subject "could not have happened otherwise" (Morpheus' statement in the elevator which reminds us of his elsewhere explicit belief in determinism) if the individual is to become a subject. At the same time, though, there is a necessary 'choice' involved: the individual *must* 'choose' the desire of the Other, must choose the Law of the Other (symbolic castration) over its 'self'. When Morpheus says to Neo in the first installment of the trilogy, "you are a slave" and "we are born into bondage," we read these as statements about the Matrix itself, or allegorically as statements about capitalist machinery; though in rendering a Lacanian reading, insofar as we read the Matrix as the location determined by the Other (as the symbolic), we understand these utterances as they apply to the world in which subjects are determined by Others. Inasmuch as one acts according to one's desires, occupies a place within the symbolic and takes on symbolic mandates, one is indeed a slave 'born into bondage'. That is, we are determined by Others and our desires by Other desires. What the trilogy presents time and again is, though there is (a necessary) choice, choice is not the same as freedom; and despite the possibility of choice, we are bound to and determined by the *things* (Other desire) around us. As the Merovingian remarks, "choice is an illusion created between those with power and those without." In this regard, both Morpheus' philosophy and the Merovingian's statement are reminiscent of Lacan's forced

choice (‘your money or your life’). It is the forced choice, submission to the Other, that allows for the individual (the 'infant'; we see parallels here to Neo's 'rebirth') to become a subject within language. Thus, for the subject to exist, or for the existing subject, choice *is* an illusion, though, as we are later informed by the Architect, a necessary illusion. The individual must choose submission to the Other, otherwise forego possibility of subjectivity. There is, on the other hand, an *other* possibility, strictly speaking. The individual can choose not to engage the Other's desire, constructing mirrors to its fantasies; can choose the imaginary and cut itself off from the symbolic world by favoring the 'self' and rejecting alienation. As we know, the subject is in both cases at a loss: s/he either loses her/his ‘self’ or loses subjectivity. The determining difference is, though, that the individual who chooses the imaginary gains nothing and foregoes a place within the symbolic (does not 'exist'), while the alienated subject gains subjectivity, a place within the symbolic. Thus, one can only be determined by “those with power” (Others), or suffer symbolic death. Alenka Zupančič, in her discussion of a Kantian notion of freedom (and in reference to the Lacanian subject), symbolizes this in the following way:



The equation is expressed as containing an element of choice, and the subject must see itself as 'free' in this regard, despite the condition that the choice is 'forced' (note that the free subject and the divided subject are symbolized in the same manner: as *subject*, one is

always already divided); or, we "might also say that in this case the subject chooses herself as subject and not as psychological 'ego', the later being understood – in all its profundity and authenticity – as the locus of the pathological."[118] The choice of the pathological subject is the choice for the imaginary, a strict adherence to which results in psychosis. Thus, as Zupančič points out, "Kant holds that as human beings we are part of Nature, which means that we are entirely, internally and externally, subject to the laws of causality. Hence our freedom is limited not only from the 'outside' but also from the 'inside': we are no more free 'in ourselves' than we are 'in the world'."[119] Another central framing of the question of choice vs. causality in *Reloaded* is when Neo is confronted by Agent Smith for the first time in this installation:

> Smith: Here I stand a new man, like you, apparently free.
> Neo: Congratulations.
> Smith: Thank you. But, as you well know, appearances can be deceiving, which brings me back to the reason why we're here. We're not here because we're free. We're here because we're not free.

We are again faced with the same 'problem' toward the end of the film when Neo attempts a return to the source and is confronted by the Architect. From a psychoanalytical perspective, it is clearly a scene where the individual is confronted by the Father, and the Father is 'exposed' as the Law, revealing a necessary mandate (the return to the source) and demanding the forfeiture of an object of desire (Trinity in this case), though it is up to the individual weather or not to take on the mandate. Much to Neo's dissatisfaction, the Architect explains Neo's situation to him, presenting him with something structured once again quite similarly to Lacan's *vel* of alienation. The Architect states, "the anomaly is systemic, creating fluctuation in even the most simplistic equations." At this, the many Neos, those we see on the screen-lined walls in this room *near* the core of the Matrix, begin screaming responses, the most prominently heard of which are "you can't control me," "I'm gonna smash you to fuckin' bits," and "you can't make me do anything." Then, they are suddenly silent and Neo turns to the Architect and says, "choice; the problem is choice." The Architect goes on to explain that there had

[118] *Ethics of the Real*, p. 32.
[119] Zupančič, pp. 22.

been a number of Matrixes before the one that they currently find themselves in and explains the cause of failure for the initial two. He explains that the 'mother' of the Matrix, the Oracle, came up with a solution that would enable the Matrix to function:

> The Architect: the answer was stumbled upon by an other, an intuitive program, initially created to investigate certain aspects of the human psyche. If I am the father of the Matrix, she is undoubtedly its mother.
>
> Neo: the Oracle.
>
> The Architect: Please. As I was saying, she stumbled upon a solution whereby nearly ninety-nine percent of all test subjects accepted the program as long as they were given a choice, even if they were only aware of the choice at a near unconscious level. While this answer functioned, it was obviously fundamentally flawed, thus creating the otherwise contradictory systemic anomaly that, if left unchecked, might threaten the system itself. Ergo, those that refuse the program, while a minority, if unchecked, would constitute an escalating probability of disaster… You are here because Zion is about to be destroyed… Which brings us at last to the moment of truth, wherein the fundamental flaw is ultimately expressed and the anomaly revealed as both beginning and end. There are two doors. The door to the right leads to the source and the salvation of Zion. The door to your left leads back to the Matrix, to her, and to the end of your species. As you adequately put, the problem is choice. But we already know what you are going to do, don't we? Already I can see the chain reaction, the chemical precursors that signal the onset of an emotion, designed specifically to overwhelm logic and reason. An emotion that is already blinding you from the simple and obvious truth: she is going to die and there is nothing you can do to stop it.

Here we have a twofold framing of choice: there is the explication of choice as a necessary element introduced into the program of the Matrix, and the choice Neo himself must make (the salvation of Zion or an attempt to save Trinity). The narrative trajectory of the film tells us throughout what Neo's choice will be: the film begins with the scene of Trinity being shot and falling to her death, and the scene reoccurs throughout the film, indicating that it will play a pivotal role in the development of the narrative. Additionally, we are given other textual hints, such as when the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar arrives in Zion and there are crowds of believers awaiting Neo. When they begin to address him and Trinity turns to leave, he says to Trinity, "no, wait," to which she replies, "it's alright, they need you," in response to which, Neo says, "I need you." With this, and with the fact that he chooses the attempt to rescue Trinity over the salvation of Zion, we might posit that he chooses the mirror world, the world that reflects his personal fantasies (or, his desires as unregulated by the third term of the Law; he refuses to forego access to the

object of desire), as opposed to the symbolic world, here represented by the society ("the name for the social Substance"[120]) of Zion. We might go as far as to say that the war does not end and Zion is not saved at the end of this installment *not* because the prophecy was a lie, as Neo tells the others, but because he chose not to fulfill the mandate set within the structure of the Other that would allow for the prophecy to be fulfilled: the Architect points him directly toward the door that would lead "to the source and to the salvation of Zion." Neo refuses to enter it. If we follow this line of thought to its logical conclusion, it brings us to a point that has perhaps suggested itself all along, from the beginning of the first film: although the Matrix is structured like the symbolic and, in many respects, provides an enlightening fictional representation of it, the imaginary elements within this potentially symbolic space are often the most prominent, the most dominant. Thus the much discussed argument of the possibility of the characters of *The Matrix* always being within the Matrix, and their excursions out of it as yet *an other* fantasy played out within the Matrix (imaginary space within the symbolic). Though before we come to any conclusions as to whether the Matrix is more representative of symbolic space or imaginary space, I would like to take a closer look at the orders of the symbolic and the imaginary and how they configure structurally with ideas of conspiracy.

[120]Žižek, "*The Matrix*, or, the Two Sides of Perversion."

Part IV. The Wall of Language

Language and the big Other: an Introduction

The core concept for my inquiry into the meaning of conspiracy narratives is based on Lacan's concept of the "wall of language" from his lectures on the "Introduction of the big Other:"[121]

> So there's the plane of the mirror, the symmetrical world of the *egos* and of the homogeneous others. We'll have to distinguish an other level, which we call the wall of language… In other words, we in fact address A1, A2, those we do not know, true Others, true subjects. They are on the other side of the wall of language [the symbolic], there where in principal I never reach them. Fundamentally, it is them I am aiming at [stress 'aiming at', as with conspiracy, the conspiracy narrative 'aims at' the Other] every time I utter true speech, but I always attain *a'*, *a"*, through reflection. I always aim at true subjects, and I have to be content with shadows. The subject is separated from the Others, the true ones, by the wall of language… In other words, language is as much there to found us in the Other as to drastically prevent us from understanding him [244].

In my reading, I want to delineate two levels, or approaches to language and conspiracy. On one, I will work with a model analogous to Lacan's above statement: that the subject addresses the Other, though only reaches others, and, further, that what keeps the subject from the Other, that which irreconcilably divides them (divides the subject from the Other and divides, or splits, the subject himself), is a wall of language. I will give a somewhat literal reading of various texts based on this model; that is to say, I will talk about the diegetic role of language – language as theme within these narratives – being that language often plays a role 'conscious' of Lacan's postulate in these narratives (some of the narratives are clearly 'familiar' with Lacan). I will look at, for example, the diegetic role that language plays in Pynchon's *Lot 49* in relation to Oedipa Mass, as the subject, and the Trystero – the conspiratorial network (of communication, of language)

[121] *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II, The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*.

that is the locus of an omnipresent inaccessible Other for her. Oedipa continually runs up against closed doors in her search for Trystero and any meaning connected to it, and these closed doors most often take the form of language and communication: from the muted post horn – symbolizing truncated communication[122] – to the Yoyodyne secret postal service, to a deaf/mute convention at her hotel, to the implications of Maxwell's demon, it is literally language that divides her from a (potential) Other. Thus, I will read Pynchon's narrative through Lacan pragmatically. Other texts in which we find a similar structure of language literally dividing the subject from the conspiratorial Other are, for example, Dick's *Time Out Of Joint*, Darren Aronofsky's *Pi*, and the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix*, all of which are concerned with code and reading code, and how this determines the parameters of one's existence. We might also think of this in relation to fictive depictions of what it means to utter or otherwise *use* the name of God in the Cabalistic tradition. For example, in the legend of the Golem, the narrative model upon which Frankenstein and all its subsequent progeny are based, a rabbi inscribes the name of God onto the brow of a clay giant he has formed with his own hands, thereby imbuing the inorganic mass with life.[123] It is the *name* of God, a word, which breaches the gap between man and God (Other). I use the word 'breach' here to indicate an original/originary breaking constitutive of a gap, and to indicate something that 'breaks' the space of the gap by allowing it to be used as a medium (between the Other and the subject). Similarly, in *Pi*, one of the conspiracies of which he is placed at the center is an effort by a community of Hassidic Jews to find the true name of God, which is encoded in the Torah through a complex system of letters and numbers. If the appropriate subject utters the true name of God, he is able to commune with God (and thereby 'reverse' the Fall). Again, it is language that, in a rather literal depiction, separates man from God, the subject from the Other.

On another level, which necessarily follows, I am reading these texts in terms of language as language acquisition (being *within* representation) and entry into the

[122] This is not to imply that the symbolic, the wall of language is itself truncated in any respect. Rather, it is precisely that which truncates.

[123] Already here we see the parallel to the myth of the creation of Adam, who was molded out of clay and given life through God's breath. Right up through *Frankenstein* to *Blade Runner* and its relative narratives, a philosophical and moral consideration of what it means for a human to assume the role of God in the Garden myth (right down to the point of expulsion) remains a central theme of these narratives about conspiracy, language, and subjectivity.

symbolic (or the failure to do so), which is implicit in these several narratives; reading the *meaning* of language's role in these narratives. That is, I will read these texts in terms of how they frame a potential subject in relation to language and the Other: does the protagonist move toward a position of subjectivity by identifying with the Other's desire (and thus 'acquire' language), or does the subject adhere to dualistic injunctions of the ego, remaining more strictly within fantasy and neglecting to become a subject within language? According to Lacan's postulate of the Wall of Language, the subject is divided from Others because he is inscribed with the language of the Other, to which (to the desires of which) he cannot but answer, though who can never have direct (because of language, because of the symbolic, and because this is an unconscious agency) access to. If we map his postulate onto conspiracy, the subject of the narratives to be considered 'finds himself' in a position relative to a potential Other in which he is constantly addressing this Other; or, the subject is in a universe in which all meaning is based on and all communication is directed at Other. In this sense, the subject is within an all-encompassing 'syntax' much very like the symbolic order, which at one and the same time binds him to the Other, is the only possible (if imagined) interface with the Other, yet necessarily keeps him cut off from the (in any case inaccessible) Other. What will be of particular interest to us is the distinction between conspiracy as adherence to the symbolic (subjectivity in the symbolic) and conspiracy as adherence to the imaginary (the individual clinging to imaginary relations). We should make a distinction between the *construction* of imaginary relationships and *answering the call* into a symbolic relationship. A narrative like Fincher's *The Game* can be instructive for this distinction: there is in fact a conspiracy, but it is a conspiracy meant to force the subject into certain (neglected) symbolic relations (familial, fraternal, romantic…), a *call* 'offering' a choice.

In *The Game*, financial sector high roller Nicholas Van Orton (Michael Douglas), a shrewd megalomaniac, is turning 48. We soon find out that his father committed suicide by jumping from the roof of their estate house (the house Nicholas still lives in) at this age. For his birthday, his somewhat estranged brother Conrad (Sean Penn) gives him a membership to Consumer Recreation Services. When Nicholas goes to their offices to find out what services they provide, he is told, "it's a game. Specifically tailored for each participant… We provide [pause] whatever's lacking." For Nicholas, we might say that

the game consists of an attempt to bring him into subjectivity; that is, to bring him into a position in which his socio-symbolic relations are not 'one sided'. In order to achieve this, he must be made to believe that he has lost everything that has any meaning to him: his money, his property, but most importantly, his sense of control, his sense of agency. He is first put through a series of compromising 'adventures' in which he is repeatedly not in control. These are intended to break his ridged will. One thing after another begins to go wrong until he is made to think that it is not a game at all that he is participating in, but a life-threatening "con." There are what appear to be several attempts on his life, he is made to believe that there is no one he can trust (with the exception of his ex-wife), and it also appears that CRS has used the information he originally provided them with to get access to and empty his bank accounts. He is then drugged and left in Mexico "for dead," with no money and no identification. When he returns to San Francisco with the one desire to take revenge, a scene is staged in which he will accidentally murder his brother, shooting him in the chest. At this point Nicholas losses all hope and all will to live and, not unlike his father, throws himself from the roof of the building where he has shot his brother. All of this, though, is part of an elaborate plan, a conspiracy Conrad sets in motion to stop Nicholas from "becoming such an asshole." In the end, a transformation takes place. Just when Nicholas is so dejected and hopeless that he wants to die, he is given a second chance. After he throws himself from the building, he crashes through a ceiling of safety glass into a reception hall and lands in a safety net, where he is immediately assisted by medical personnel and stunt aids. Upon standing, he sees his brother, who tells him that this was all his birthday present. He realizes that all of the people in his life are around him, are 'there for him', and that he has lost nothing. What he has gained, though, is a different kind of access to what the people around him mean in his life. The transformation that takes place is one in which he realizes the value of the people who are a part of his life, in which he 'realizes' the importance of taking part in symbolic fictions and taking his place as subject in symbolic relations. Thus, we might say that he finally answers the call of a choice offering him entry into the symbolic. This, for now, we will call the syntax of conspiracy, but let's return to Lacan's formulation of the wall of language.

In the following diagram, we can see that the first location Lacan speaks of, the "plane of the mirror" and the "world of the *egos*," is the order of the imaginary (insofar as we can theoretically divide the orders). This is where we would place our conspired against subjects (Sgt. Raymond Shaw, Ragle Gumm, Thomas Anderson, Truman Burbank, Oedipa Mass, Maximillian Cohen, and so on). The next location he delineates is that of the wall of language. The wall of language, the location of signification and representation, is equal to the symbolic. This is what we will map the conspiratorial narrative the subject 'reads' or 'writes' onto; this is the location in which the *meaning* of the conspiracy is pieced together and the (conspiratorial) world takes on its meaningful cohesion. At the other side of the wall, the location of the Other, we find our conspiratorial agent/s: those who imbue the symbolic with its particular meaning (*the* symbolic constituent) by determining for the subject his place within it.

imaginary egos/others mirror plane	Wall of Language / the symbolic	Others

Let us turn, then, to the location most central to our inquiry: the symbolic.

The Symbolic

When the Wachowski brothers wrote the story for *The Matrix*, one of the admittedly influential texts that would inform their narrative was Philip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint*; a story about conspiracy, brainwashing, and, among other things, semiotics. In *Time Out of Joint*, a small universe is constructed around a single character, Ragle Gumm, solely for the purpose of enabling him to decode puzzles as part of a competition in a national new paper. Unbeknownst to Gumm, who is the national champion in the puzzle solving competition, he is actually helping to decode military plans that indicate when and where resistance attacks and bombings from the moon will hit the earth. As illustrated via the construct world Gumm lives in, the text is interested in the distinction - or relation - between language (representation) and 'real' objects. After Ragle has begun to concern himself with thoughts of quasi alternate realities, with the idea that one carries around experiences one has no memories of, he begins to find himself in situations that, in addition to calling into question his memory and experiences, force him to consider certain aspects of perception, communication, and meaning. While out with his neighbor June at the public swimming pool, he decides to get something to drink. He approaches the kiosk and asks, "'Got any beer?' he said. His voice sounded funny. Thin and remote. The counter man in white apron and cap stared at him, stared and did not move. Nothing happened. No sound, anywhere. Kids, cars, the wind; it all shut off" (54). This moment is not unlike ones we've become accustomed to in contemporary film: in Amenobar's *Abre los Ojos* (refilmed as *Vanilla Sky*), *The Thirteenth Floor*, *eXistenZ*, *The Matrix*, not to mention in earlier episodes of the television series *The Twilight Zone*. What they emphasize is a character's inability to distinguish between reality and a simulation, and they consequently call up Cartesian notions of perception, which in turn call up questions of how we receive and process information; that is, how information is *encoded*, how we *read* the code, and how 'reliable' this process is. As Ragle stood there, "[t]he soft-drink stand fell into bits. Molecules. He saw the molecules, colorless, without qualities, that made it up." In post-*Matrix* jargon, this is what we might call a 'glitch in the matrix'.

> Then he saw through, into the space beyond it, he saw the hill behind, the trees and the sky. He saw the soft-drink stand go out of existence, along with the counter man, the cash register,

> the big dispenser of orange drink, the taps for Coke and root-beer, the ice-chests of bottles, the hot dog broiler, the jars of mustard, the shelves of cones, the row of heavy round metal lids under which were the different ice creams.
>
> In its place was a slip of paper. He reached out his hand and took hold of the slip of paper. On it was printing, block letters.
>
> SOFT-DRINK STAND[124]

What does this scene tell us if not something about signification? It says, to Ragle with an aside to the reader, "what you are seeing is a sign. All that you see are signs. Your 'seeing' can only be the seeing of signs." Ragle is confronted with precisely this idea shortly afterward and, uncomfortably, comes to the same conclusion. Once he is home, he approaches his brother-in-law, Vic. Confounded by his recent experience, he tells Vic that he is considering checking himself into a hospital in order to spend some time thinking about things, when the conversation abruptly shifts to empirical philosophy:

> He waved his hand at the piano over in the corner of the living room. 'How do we know that piano exists?'
>
> 'We don't,' Vic said.
>
> 'Maybe it doesn't.'
>
> Vic said, 'I'm sorry, but as far as I'm concerned, that's just a bunch of words.'
>
> At that, Ragle's face lost its color entirely. His mouth dropped open.

Vic's response is clearly meant to indicate that he finds this type of philosophizing to be 'just a bunch of word'; that is, mere rumination. What is significant here though is how Ragle interprets his response: the piano itself is 'just a bunch of words'. Later, while sitting at dinner with the rest of his family, Ragle is lost in thought. He is oblivious to what is happening around him, and to himself, "Words, he thought" (59).[125] Vic's inadvertent suggestion that *things*, like the piano, are all 'just a bunch of words' sends Ragle's head reeling into a panic concerning the empirical nature of 'things' insofar as they 'exist' for any individual, eventually leading him to some sort of understanding at the root of his experience:

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[124] Pp. 54-5

[125] Recalling Hamlet's answer to Polonius when asked what he is reading. Dick's title is also taken from *Hamlet*.

> Central problem in philosophy. Relation of word to object…what is a word? Arbitrary sign. But we live in words. Our reality, among words, not things. No such thing as a thing anyhow; a gestalt in the mind. Thingness…sense of substance. An illusion. Word is more real than the object it represents.
>
> Word doesn't represent reality. Word *is* reality. For us, anyhow. Maybe God gets to objects. Not us, though.
>
> In his coat, hanging up in the hall closet, was the metal box with the six words in it.
>
> SOFT-DRINK STAND
> DOOR
> FACTORY BUILDING
> HIGHWAY
> DRINKING FOUNTAIN
> BOWL OF FLOWERS[126]

Dick's story, on one level, tells a tale in which an individual finds himself within a conspiracy in the conventional sense and at the mercy of conspiratorial agents; but on another, equally prominent level provides commentary on the 'conspiratorial' nature of language itself: that language always keeps something hidden, that it controls us insofar as it determines our thinking and relationship to things, that, in fact, language *is* our thinking and our relationship to things, and in so being, constitutes the very things we perceive. With this concept, so central to *Time Out of Joint*, we have arrived at the philosophical basis the Wachowski brothers radically employ in their first installment of *The Matrix* trilogy, in which the world as we know it is portrayed as a computer simulation, as a program, as a collection of characters - ones (Neo, the One) and zeros (Cipher: the mathematical symbol for a cipher is '0') - literally as language. In this regard, the matrix offers many parallels to the Lacanian order of the symbolic, where language functions 'conspiratorially' to give form and meaning to perception.

In "What is the Matrix," Read Mercer Schuchardt quotes Marshall McLuhan, explaining "literacy as the base and model of all programs," but also that which "locks the minds and senses of its users in the mechanical and fragmentary matrix that is so necessary to the maintenance of mechanized society," and goes on to state that "what McLuhan means by the term 'matrix' is precisely what the Wachowski brothers take it to mean: a system of control."[127] In this sense, one might rather readily and accurately render a Marxist reading of *The Matrix* (which Schuchard does), where the socio-

[126] p. 60
[127] From *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in* The Matrix: p. 27.

economic machinery of late capitalist culture is that which we are 'slaves' to, defining our lives and keeping us in place, so to speak. Though what I find equally interesting here is the conspicuous role of 'literacy' in this statement. If we take literacy to mean *knowing* a language – its codes and functions – then we can as well read this statement as follows: *being within language is that which locks the mind and sense of the subject into the matrix so necessary to the maintenance of society*. From a Lacanian (or Levi-Straussian or Kantian) perspective, we already know this to be true: social interaction, from its function to its machinery and location, is symbolic (is, like language, representative), and the relationships within society are based on symbolic structures. The symbolic fictions that serve as our social basis are regulated by exchanges (of gifts, for example), the circuit of which functions as communication. These communications function to establish and uphold social structure. Evans points out: "Since the most basic form of exchange is communication itself (the exchange of words, the gift of speech…), and since the concepts of law and of structure are unthinkable without language, the symbolic is essentially a linguistic dimension."[128] Being 'within' the symbolic already implies being within language (and, likewise, the symbolic *is* a matrix; we might say it is *the* matrix), and society is absolutely dependant on our being (and becoming) subjects within language.

Subject/Other: Who's Who in Conspiracy?

> *And the voices before and after the dead man's that had phoned at random during the darkest, slowest hours, searching ceaseless among the dial's ten million possibilities for that magical Other who would reveal herself out of the roar of relays, monotone litanies of insult, filth, fantasy, love whose brute repetition must someday call into being the trigger for the unnamable act, the recognition, The Word*.
>
> - Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

In a candidly Lacanian manner, Pynchon's *Lot 49* frames language as precisely that which both binds and, at the very same time, divides people (from one another; from themselves). Intimately tied into its observations on the conspiracy-like nature of

[128] Pp. 201.

language are the fundamental issues of identity and interpersonal relations. As the story opens, Oedipa Mass, just home from a Tupperware/fondue party and feeling somewhat intoxicated, finds that she has been named executrix of the estate of her former lover, Pierce Inverarity, who has recently died, and who a year prior during a late night phone conversation threatened to return as 'The Shadow'. Through the course of the book, we become quite aware that his threat was not an idle one: he manages to haunt Oedipa's life down to the minutest detail. Any Lacanian notion of subjectivity is firmly rooted in the interplay between and the interdependence of the individual and its defining/organizing principle, (the desire of) the big Other. One level of conspiracy in *Lot 49* is one in which Pierce, as the conspiratorial agent/agency, determines the conditions of Oedipa's existence. In this sense, we might map the Lacanian notion of the subject and the big Other onto the 'relationship' between Oedipa and Pierce Inverarity, a relationship which provides, from beginning to end, the basic structure for the narrative.

Unsure of herself in regard to executing his estate, Oedipa contacts her lawyer, who, when Oedipa inquires about having someone else perform the task at hand, asks her, "aren't you even interested…in what you might find out?" We are then informed that "[a]s things developed, she was to have all manner of revelations. Hardly about Pierce Inverarity or herself; but about what remained yet had somehow, before this, stayed away" (12). What follows this statement though, apparently qualifying it, seems to run contrary to her learning "hardly about Pierce Inverarity or herself." What follows, first, is a description of what was Oedipa's rather likely psychotropic-drug shroud state of mind when she first met Inverarity,[129] and further that she imagined herself 'Rapunzel-like', stuck in a tower not unlike her ego, with Pierce as the one to come to rescue her from the tower: "Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: and what really keeps her where she is is magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all" (13). Though we might read this malignant magic visited on her from the outside that keeps her where she is as the psychotropic drugs inferred, it is more

[129] "There had hung the sense of buffeting, insulation, she had noticed the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus." In addition to the reader's knowledge that she has a psychiatrist who prescribes her medication, the preceding rather reads like a description of the effects of psychotropic drugs.

interesting and perhaps more plausible to map this description back onto Oedipa and Inverarity themselves in relation to the orders of the imaginary and the symbolic. Oedipa, finding herself Rapunzel-like in her ego-tower, is trapped and yet potentially on the verge of a transition (an escape).[130] As the tower is equated to her ego, we might posit that she is hypothetically 'trapped' in a mirror stage - "a stadium (*stade*) in which the subject is permanently caught and captivated by his own image" - cut off from proper symbolic relations (as will be discussed a bit further on, the tower's description and Oedipa's associations to it heavily reinforce this analogy).[131] What keeps her there could as well be the lack of something, something missing, as it might the presence of something, some restrictive presence. Looked at in this respect, we could posit that a call into a symbolic role (via some mandate or symbolic relation) is missing and is the magic keeping her there. Is this not what is at stake in the fairytale of Rapunzel and her tower? She awaits a lover who will free her from her isolation – where there can only be mirror projections (she remains a simple excess of parental enjoyment, which is reflected to her repetitively by the witch who keeps her locked up yet sits with her daily) – and, with her release into the wide world and the promise of romance and familial relations, will place her into proper symbolic relations. In this case, we conceive of the prince as a tool of the Other (a vehicle for the Other's desire), as something determined by the Other because he is in possession of the proper gaze, for example, and therefore embodies something of the Other (of the Other's desire).[132] When considered from this angle, Oedipa's learning something "about what remained yet had somehow, before this, stayed away," takes on new meaning: it is precisely desire, or the 'object' of desire, that remains yet always stays away. The desire of the Other, as we have noted, is an extimate 'guiding principle' that by definition may not be reached, and is never about one *individual* or an *other*, but precisely 'about' the subject and the Other. Or, to put it yet another way, the Lacanian subject is both necessarily removed from and determined by the Other, which will work on her as if a conspiracy, which will be inescapable, and yet which will remain all the

[130] Perhaps an ironic complimentary inversion of Plato's allegory of the cave!
[131] Also, "the ego is the result of identification with one's own specular image" and is thus a "product of misunderstanding (*méconnaissance*)." Evans, pp. 115-116.
[132] Here we should recall the originary parameters of Trinity and Neo's relationship, viewing the Oracle as a representative for the Other's desire: "The oracle told me that I would fall in love and that man, the man that I loved, would be the one."

while inaccessible. Thus, if we equate Pierce as an agency of Other desire, by freeing her from her 'ego-tower' (in setting forth the offer of symbolic fictions/relations or mandates - romance, the execution of the will…), she (potentially) moves into the symbolic realm of Other desire, ever-present at the core of the subject, yet paradoxically staying away (the 'hidden' extimate kernel of Other desire).

Though the Lacanian big Other has less to do with the idea of any actual person and more to do with *function*, Inverarity embodies many characteristics, so to speak, of what we think of in regard to (the function of) the Other. In a rather tangible sense, he is very much the inaccessible and omnipresent Other: he owns vast stretches of real-estate everywhere, to the extent that, wherever Oedipa goes, he is present in his land holdings ("what the hell didn't he own?" p.25), thus she is always 'within his territory', which we might read as yet another metaphor for the subject always being in the language of or space determined by the Other. He also "owned a large block of shares, had been somehow involved in negotiating an understanding with the county tax assessor to lure Yoyodyne," the city's biggest source of employment, to San Narciso, which "was part, he explained, of being a founding father" (15-16). Additionally, Inverarity is dead, as far as is known, and thus 'in fact' inaccessible, yet he permeates Oedipa's life at all levels – from her understanding of herself, to her actions, to her thinking, to her daily occupations and the physical world around her. We might say that Oedipa as a subject is completely subject to and within the syntax of Pierce Inverarity. Additionally, it is Inverarity that determines the mandate Oedipa must fulfill and which further determines (in terms of contingency) the course of events after she has been *named* executrix.

In "The Locked Room," from Auster's *New York Trilogy*, we see, as I've already suggested, how Fanshawe might function in a similar fashion as the determining Other for the unnamed narrator of the tale. He starts by explaining how Fanshawe was always present in his life, always a determining factor, always a measure:

> It seems to me now that Fanshawe was always there. He is the place where everything begins for me, and without him I would hardly know who I am… Whenever I think of my childhood

> now, I see Fanshawe. He was the one who was with me, the one who shared my thoughts, the one I saw whenever I looked up from myself.[133]

Though Fanshawe as the narrator knew him is 'gone', only 'really' existing in the memory, in the psyche, of the narrator, this naturally in no way compromises the force or presence of his meaning, marking the external world, encoding it for the narrator. The narrator tells us that "even though memories can be false… I don't think I would be wrong in saying that I have kept the aura of those days inside me, and to the extent that I can feel what I felt then, I doubt those feelings can lie" (210). Indeed, those feelings can't but tell the truth as it is meaningful, as it must function for our narrator; that is, they cannot but tell something 'true' about the narrator, whether or not they are historically accurate (which is only incidental). The next line tells us that "whatever it was that Fanshawe eventually became, my sense is that it started for him back then," and goes on to explain the infallibility of Fanshawe. Thus, Fanshawe takes the role of the symbolic father, a dead father, who 'enacts' the letter of the Law that "underpins the symbolic order."[134] Within the narrative, what Fanshawe became, or becomes, is a sort of ghost who determines the conditions of the narrator's life:

> I understood now how badly I was deceiving myself, but I did not find that out until much later. By definition, a thought is something you are aware of. The fact that I did not once stop thinking about Fanshawe, that he was inside me day and night for all those months, was unknown to me at the time. And if you are not aware of having a thought, is it legitimate to say that you are thinking? I was haunted, perhaps, I was even possessed – but there were no signs of it, no clues to tell me what was happening.[135]

We can see here the way in which Fanshawe is 'integrated' as Other, his Other qualities, and also the manner in which the subject must 'make a choice' concerning his status as subject, concerning his relation to the Other (cf. Lacan's *Vel*). This choice – of accepting the desire of the Other, of accepting the *Other* of the Other – takes place at a necessarily unconscious level, and though (unconsciously) this must be 'perceived' as a choice. This

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[133] P. 199. Notable here is not only the way in which Fanshawe functions like an Other, but also the way he functions, or perhaps more accurately function*ed*, like a mirror. As we will see and have already glimpsed, most of these narratives are not distinct in their framing of imaginary *or* symbolic, other (mirror) *or* Other; though this is precisely because of the collective nature of their inquiry, "what are the forces that determine *me*?" I will address this at length when discussing conspiracy as related to the order of the imaginary.
[134] Evans, pp. 100.
[135] P. 242.

choice is already ‘hauntingly’ made by the time the subject finds himself in the position of subject, who thus can ask, ‘subject to what’? The answer being, ‘subject to Other desires’, to the will of the Other, which divides the subject from himself. As Dylan Evans points out, "the subject is not simply equivalent to a conscious sense of agency, which is a mere illusion produced by the ego [and thus proper to the imaginary], but to the unconscious; Lacan's subject is the subject of the unconscious" (p. 195). For the narrator, Fanshawe not only imbues various events with specific meaning, but, as in *Lot 49*, determines the actual conditions of the narrator’s symbolic universe: what he occupies himself with, where he lives, who he loves, and so forth. The narrator tells us in the end, in reference to Fanshawe's book, that he is “blinded by the book that had been written for me” (314). That is to say, there is no (seeing) ‘outside’ of this narrative for him, there is no outside of the narrative of the Other.

Although the desire of the Other, the function of the Other, and the subject's relation to the Other are constituted on the level of the unconscious, the following passage is illustrative of some of the characteristics of the subject/Other 'relationship':

> I sensed that I was no longer alone, that I could never be alone in that place. Fanshawe was there, and no matter how hard I tried not to think about him, I couldn’t escape. This was unexpected, galling. Now that I had stopped looking for him, he was more present to me than ever before. The whole process had been reversed. After all these months of trying to find him, I felt as though I was the one who had been found. Instead of looking for Fanshawe, I had actually been running away from him… For if I could convince myself that I was looking for him, then it necessarily followed that he was somewhere else – somewhere beyond me, beyond the limits of my life. But I had been wrong. Fanshawe was exactly where I was, and he had been there since the beginning. From the moment his letter arrived, I had been struggling to imagine him, to see him as he might have been, but my mind always conjured a blank. At best, there was one impoverished image: the door of a locked room. That was the extent of it: Fanshawe alone in that room… This room, I now discovered, was located inside my skull (292-3).

We start with the concept of the *subject of accompaniment*: the subject is 'never alone', insofar as at its (decentred) 'core' is the extimate kernel of the Other's desire, which is there from "the beginning" of subjectivity; the subject also only retaining its status insofar as s/he is in fact 'accompanied' by the desire of the Other. As such, we might also say that the subject is established and retains its status, "From the moment his [the Other's] letter arrive[s]." The 'letter', as we know, functions as the material underpinning

of the symbolic order (the 'materiality' of the wall of language that both divides and binds the subject to the Other). Furthermore, once the 'letter of the Other' does arrive, it functions from within the subject, as Fanshawe is within the narrator, a trope for which might be "a locked room…located inside my skull."

Again like Inverarity in *Lot 49*, Fanshawe 'reemerges' (also a ghost), exclusively for the 'subject' in question. And like Inverarity, he pointedly arranges himself, his 'presence' and function, as Other desire, as the structuring principle of the subject's desire and the subject's place within the symbolic:

> I want you to think of me as dead. Nothing is more important than that, and you must not tell anyone that you've heard from me. I am not going to be found, and to speak of it would only lead to more trouble than it's worth. Above all, say nothing to Sophie. Make her divorce me, and then marry her as soon as you can. I trust you to do that – and I give you my blessings. The child needs a father, and you're the only one I can count on.[136]

Fanshawe demands his absolute inaccessibility and allocates the desires of the subject/narrator, as well as setting forth symbolic mandates that will place the narrator in his primary interpellative and symbolic community (family). Furthermore, the only way for the subject/narrator to 'access' or engage the Other/Fanshawe is to take on, to accept, his desires and this mandate, which he in any case longs to do, and in this regard we might say that he already unconsciously identifies with the desire of the Other. This mandate, when accepted, unfolds into a new universe for the subject, placing him at an initiatory point of reference: he becomes both husband and father. With this initiation into the symbolic, into symbolic fictions, I do not mean to infer that the subject is suddenly at *the center* of a symbolic universe he had previously been excluded from. Rather, the subject is always the decentred subject, or the 'center' is always decentred:

> Everything had changed for me, and words that I had never understood before suddenly began to make sense. This came as a revelation, and when I finally had time to absorb it, I wondered how I had managed to live so long without learning this simple thing. I am not talking about desire so much as knowledge, the discovery that two people, through desire, can create this thing more powerful than either of them can create alone. This knowledge changed me, I think, and actually made me feel more human. By belonging to Sophie, I began to feel as though I belonged to everyone else as well. *My true place in the world, it turned out, was somewhere beyond myself, and if that place was inside me, it was also unlocatable*. This was

[136] Pp. 237.

> the tiny hole between self and not-self, and for the first time in my life *I saw this nowhere as the exact centre of the world*.[137]

At the diegetic point that illustrates his locating, we can also tease out, if I may digress for a moment, a reference (intended or not) to the initiating of the symbolic world, of language: Freud's anecdote of the *fort, da* game.

The narrator explains that as they were on a flight to New York to look for a new apartment, "an hour into the flight, Ben peed through his diapers onto my lap. When I showed him the large dark spot on my pants, he laughed, clapped his hands together, and then, looking straight into my eyes, called me Da for the first time" (241). Naturally, the reference here is to show that the child recognizes him as his father, which we might also read as an initiating interpellation. In addition to this, the child 'recognizes' the presence of the narrator in his significatory capacity, in his *symbolic* capacity (as father), in his presence as it is meaningful to the child; or to put it another way, as suggested by the pee spot, the child sees himself 'on' the narrator. He is *da* (here), as opposed to *fort* (gone). As we know, Freud's *Fort, da* illustrates that a child has begun to think in symbolic or significatory terms. When it understands that its mother is *fort* for the first time, it has moved from the position in which the universe is one, in which everything is *me*, to separation, and thus into the universe of representation and language: it has a *concept* of its mother.

In "The Locked Room," we can read the "Da" as indicating that the narrator is 'there' and that the narrator has come to fill the symbolic position of the father (Daddy), that a symbolic relationship (and a symbolic 'world' or fiction) has come into bloom between the child and himself. Though what the narrative does not let us forget is that at the root of the narrator's (new) symbolic relationships is Fanshawe (the biological father of the child), always acting from the place of Other desire, and this is the critical point on which the narrative is hinged. The father-son relationship the narrator has with the Ben throws this into relief. Toward the end of the story, when he is having breakfast with Ben before going to see Fanshawe for the last time (before relinquishing him and becoming himself an Other?), his son tells him he wants an Elephant:

[137] Pp. 232, italics mine.

> "I think you should ride it home. Sitting on top with a crown on your head. Just like an emperor."
> Narrator: "The emperor of what?"
> Ben: "The emperor of little boys."[138]

That is to say, do what you must go to do, but when you return, know that you return as an Other, my Father. We should think of this in regard to what Evans (paraphrasing Lacan) says about entry into subjectivity and the parent/adult representing the big Other: "The moment after the subject has jubilantly assumed his image as his own, he turns his head round toward this adult, who represents the big Other, as if to call on him to ratify this image" (pp. 116).

Concerning the big Other, I should make a distinction between two specific types of conspiracy narratives. We are interested in conspiracy for the time being in so far as it attempts to locate an Other as the agency behind and constitutive of a totalizing syntax, or in other words, the Other as constitutive of the symbolic:

Lacanian Subject	Wall of Language	Big Other
Conspired against Subject	Conspiracy	Conspiratorial Agent

In this regard, we view the symbolic as the conspiratorial world (equated in the table to the wall of language) in which everything is significant and in which everything tends toward the control of the conspiratorial agent, the Other (and vice-versa: conspiracy as a trope for the symbolic). In such a schema, we would equate the conspired against subject with the Lacanian subject, both of which are determined within a network of meaning by an inaccessible 'agency' (the big Other/the conspiratorial Agent) on the Other side of this network. Thus we might say that in most of the narratives considered here, the subject finds himself in a totalizing world controlled by the conspiratorial Other. An alternate type of conspiracy narrative is one that is more so concerned with large-scale hysterical projection. Films such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*[139] (highly characteristic of the

[138] P. 303.
[139] Don Sieleg, 1956; Philip Kaufman, 1978.

logic of Cold War paranoia and the 'enemy within') and John Carpenter's *They Live* locate the subject not among the mass of others who are unwittingly controlled (determined) by the minority Other, but rather locate the subject as the minority among majority others (mirrors) who threaten moral and bodily corruption: they represent potential 'sick' manifestations of the self. We might read these films as hysterical projections in which my fears and desires manifest themselves somatically, as somatic symptoms manifest in my phantasmatic others. There are many points on which these two types of conspiracy narratives converge, but for our purposes here, we will primarily be working with the type first outlined.[140]

That the subject-Other relationship constitutes the symbolic universe a subject finds him/herself within, we know. As Oedipa in *Lot 49* begins, in paranoiac fashion, to discover herself at the center of a universe under the 'authorship' of Pierce Inverarity, she discovers a network of communication that is secret and thoroughly pervasive, one which does not function on the surface, but 'underneath', and despite its inaccessibility, it is everywhere, having influence beyond what to her seemed conceivable, and older than any other postal network of communication that remains in existence. If Pierce Inverarity embodies the Other for Oedipa, then the symbolic network which he will bring Oedipa into is what Oedipa will come to know as Tristrero, or Trystero: "the more she collected the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero" (56). Thus, the greater symbolic universe, the one Inverarity seems to or has attempted to introduce Oedipa into, the Tristero/Trystero, is the fabric into which all that constitutes Oedipa and all that Oedipa perceives and understands is woven. We have an earlier reference that is suggestive of this woven fabric as well. We are told that, while in Mexico City, Oedipa and Pierce "wandered into an exhibition of paintings by the beautiful Spanish exile Remedios Varo: in the central paintings of a triptych, titled 'Bordando el Manto Terrestre', were a number

[140] One might argue that in *They Live* we can also identify an attempt to locate the (malign) Other and revolt against him/her. The problem is that, in these narratives, the subject is on the outside of a symbolic community and fights to remain so or to destroy the community. Here, as I have suggested, this inside/outside polemic is better read as the division between the ego (*my-self*) and that in me by which I feel threatened as opposed to determined by [problematic in terms of castrative threat? which comes from outside and is then integrated, not from inside?], the 'outside' within me. Thus these films might be more instructive when read through Kristeva's *abject* (see ch.?).

of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry, and the tapestry was the world. Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried" (13). Again, we might recall Lacan's statement about the symbolic coming into its entirety at once and encompassing all. The tapestry here can function as a trope for the symbolic, containing all things in the world: "the tapestry was the world," or the word, into or through which all is woven, that we might perceive it. We might propose that the weaving of the fabric is an all encompassing and ever perpetual process like the symbolic itself and like conspiracy theories. For the time being, we can view them all as representative of the location that allows us to live as subjects and through which we are determined by the Other.

The Wall of Language and the Symbolic

As delineated in the introduction to this section, we know that the symbolic is essentially language; that is, it is the region of representation (a sign system). As we have seen in all of the conspiracy narratives we are dealing with here and several more, language plays a central role and often appears to have a structure/function very much like Lacan's *wall of language*: it divides *me* from Others. In many cases, such as in *The Matrix* and *Time Out of Joint*, the narrative even offers an illustration of how language (the Matrix program, for example) 'splits' the subject, cutting him/her off from 'himself' and the 'real world'. This 'real world' of conspiracy narratives is not the Lacanian real, but rather a world or social order that is or that the conspired against subject imagines to be at another location, such as in *The Truman Show*, for example.[141] In conspiracy narratives, 'reality' is continually called into question: 'Is the world I live in the actual world?' 'Are there other locations of existence as 'real' as the one I find myself now in?' and so forth. A theme common to these narratives that frame a conspired against subject as being cut off

[141] Nevertheless, it may be instructive to consider this as a trope for being cut off from the Lacanian real.

from the 'real world' by language is that a character eventually becomes driven to a necessity of reading code. The character becomes 'conscious' of being within language as opposed to 'real' or reality space and this triggers panic, often a need to move beyond the 'language barrier' in order to see what is on the Other side (an impossible mission/symbolic suicide), to find out what constitutes the wall of language. I would link this to what Žižek says about our contemporary experiences continually confronting us "with situations in which we are compelled to take note of how our sense of reality and normal attitude towards it is grounded in a symbolic fiction, i.e. how the 'big Other' that determines what counts as normal and accepted truth, what is the horizon of meaning in a given society, is in no way directly grounded in 'facts' as rendered by the scientific 'knowledge in the real'."[142] It is this condition that jars the subject lose, compelling him/her to find a way to integrate these contemporary experiences into his or her system of knowledge.

In *Pi*, Maximilian Cohen, a brilliant but highly paranoid and reclusive mathematician, is convinced that all things "can be represented and understood through numbers." This being one of Cohen's repeatedly stated assumptions, he is determined to get to the core of this mathematical representation in much the same way Neo in *Matrix Reloaded* is determined to get to the core of the mainframe of the matrix (which, notably, he has a window of 314 seconds to do; 314 here, like most details in the *Matrix* films, not being ambiguous, as we will surely see that pi, 3.14…, is a way to express the inherent part and problematic in the program at the core of the matrix, just as Neo himself is "the sum of a remainder of an unbalanced equation inherent in the programming of the matrix:" pi). Once this core is reached, when contact with the Other is made, there is a vital transformation. In *Matrix Reloaded*, it is believed that this contact will save the humans and allow them to conquer the machines, putting an end to the Matrix. In *Pi*, this dynamic is perhaps less optimistic and more accurately set up according to the dynamic subject/wall-of-language/Other. We will find later in the narrative that what Cohen is searching for at the core of mathematical representation is, in Jewish mysticism, the *true name* of God. It will also become clear that possession of this true name will mean his

[142] "The Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion."

destruction in the world as we know it/he knows it. In other words, he can only exist as a subject if he is on the *other* (mirror) side of the wall of language, and not the Other side, which by definition must remain inaccessible. [143] When he starts out, he is looking for deep structures in what is thought to be a construct that is primarily anomalous in development – the stock market:[144]

> Restate my assumptions: One, mathematics is the language of nature. Two, everything around us can be represented and understood through numbers. Three, if you graph the numbers of any system, patterns emerge. Therefore, there are patterns everywhere in nature. Evidence: the cycling of disease epidemics, the wax and wane of caribou populations, sunspot cycles, the rise and fall of the Nile. So what about the stock market? A universe of numbers that represents the global economy; millions of human hands at work; billions of minds; a vast network squeeming with life. An organism, a natural organism. My hypothesis: within the stock market there is a pattern as well. Right in front of me, hiding behind the numbers.

Here again we have a trope for the symbolic, the 'language of nature', in that there is a matrix mapped onto all things perceived, a *language* inherent to our understanding of things and functioning to make them perceptible, inherent to perception. This is where the symbolic, conspiracy theory, and the Cartesian circle merge. In conspiracy narratives, one perceives patterns as imbued with meaning, and their very meaningfulness makes them dependant on the processes of perception. This pattern one perceives is what I have equated to one becoming conscious of being 'within language' – that is, in a rather general sense, within the symbolic, or within representation. Just as in the Cartesian circle, the knowledge of the existence of something (God/myself) becomes contingent upon perception (always based in representation), but at the same time, in order to determine that the thing exists, we must isolate it from our undependable sensory tools

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[143] Notably, in each of the films, once the 'core' is reached, there is subsequent death: in *Pi*, Max Cohen dies (by drilling a hole through his skull and into his brain, but is subsequently portrayed within an enlightened space); at the end of *Matrix Reloaded*, we are told that nearly all the inhabitants of Zion die. Again, I would equate this with symbolic death and additionally link it back to the idea of a narrative coming to its close by necessity. In the *Matrix* trilogy, we will have a new narrative, though by the internal logic of *Reloaded*'s narrative, it should end (as an individual narrative unit) where it does – exactly where our subject reaches the outermost (or in this case, the innermost) location and is faced with the terminal consequences.

[144] As a thing that, on a large scale, appears to have somewhat regular patterns and is relatively dependable, though not predictable due to anomalous or 'random' elements on more finite levels, such a structure, more or less regular macroscopically though varied microscopically, has the attributes typical to chaos theory. Here again, with Neo and the resistance, described by the Architect in terms of chaos theory (choice being important here), as an anomaly inherent in an otherwise regular and predictable system, there are parallels between *Pi* and *The Matrix*.

that in fact feed and are thereby constitutive of our perception. Descartes writes: "…even though the objects of my sensory experience and imagination may have no existence outside me, nonetheless the modes of thinking I refer to as cases of sensory perception and imagination, in so far as they are simply modes of thinking, do exist within me" (*Meditations*, pp. 24). Similarly, understanding is contingent upon language, which is always a filter separating us from the real, whose existence outside of our perception we might also question. To get to the core of what determines language, to get to the Other side of it (or to get to the real), we would have to excise something essential, without which there is no understanding. Given these structural similarities, it might be instructive to map the Cartesian subject into our reading:

subject	wall of language (symbolic)	Other
conspired against subject	conspiracy	conspiratorial agent
Cartesian subject	sense perception	God

With this, we can see traces of Descartes' *First Philosophy* in Lacan's wall of language. Part of Descartes' tactic in *The First Philosophy* was to implement a methodology of scientific rigor in the pursuit of knowledge. In order to substantiate the existence of God to ourselves as humans, we must, as with all scientific experiments aiming at exactitude, work within a controlled environment. For Descartes, the space in which we would prove God's existence would be that of the human mind. Therefore, in order to eliminate inaccurate data or input, the senses must not be trusted as input media. Though, on the other hand, it is only through some inherent sense perception that God can actually be 'proved'. Thus, it is sense perception (like the symbolic/wall of language, or language itself) that both founds man in God (or God in man) and "prevents us from understanding him," or cuts us off. On a narrative or diegetic level, *Pi* blends two of these parallel categories: that of the conspired against subject and that of Cartesian subject.

As the conspired against subject, Max Cohen is pursued (or determined) by two independent agencies. On the one hand, there are the agents from "the predictive strategy firm, Lance and Percy," who represent the corporate bad guys with all the money, the right connections, access to all kinds of otherwise private information, the gamut of

means of persuasion, or, to put it simply, power and agency. They have set up a network of surveillance that includes street agents monitoring his whereabouts, bugging his home, a brute squad, and the like. They are privy to the fact that Max is looking for a 'key' to the stock market, trying to find readable patterns of repetition within it, and they pursue him in hopes of gaining this knowledge. Additionally, there is a band of Hassidic Jews who have also been monitoring his work and his whereabouts and who attempt to employ Max in their search for the true name of God - which should be a 216 digit code encrypted within the torah - first by friendly means, appealing to his curiosity, then by force, and finally by reason. In both of these cases, we have the following dynamic: conspired against subject – conspiracy – conspiratorial agent. In the end, Max refuses to help either and manages to evade them long enough to 'confront' the Cartesian dynamic, which is thematically present throughout the film.

Early on, the voiceover of Max states, "when I was a little kid, my mother told me not to stare into the sun. So once when I was six, I did."[145] This piece of narrative is repeated throughout and becomes a trope for encountering the real, or real characteristics of the Other and being irreparably traumatized as a result.[146] He continues, "the doctors didn't know if my eyes would ever heal. I was terrified, alone in that darkness. Slowly, daylight crept in through the bandages, and I could see. But something else had changed inside me. That day I had my first headache." During the voiceover, we see Max washing blood from his nose and popping a cocktail of various prescription pills into his mouth. At the end of the voiceover there is a cut to him unlocking his apartment door, which entails peering through the peephole to be sure no one is on the other side, releasing three chain-locks, and unlocking a massive deadbolt. This altogether signifies that, as a result of this forbidden encounter – staring 'into the sun' – his 'vision' was affected and he has been both somatically (the nose bleeds and headaches, both suggesting potential neurological traumatization/damage) and psychologically (paranoia) traumatized. As the film continues and he becomes increasingly aware of some special significance of a number

[145] We might recall Icarus again here.

[146] With the trajectory of the plot, it also comes to represent the encounter with God in the Cartesian dynamic, and is furthermore a trope for looking into the face of God in Egyptian and Judeo-Christian mythology. Not incidentally, in *Revolutions* Neo is blinded shortly before he enters the "desert of the real," the machine world, where everything he 'sees' is made of light. This is also a nice parallel back to the world of the matrix, as the world of light resembles the green light of the information code the matrix consists of, light (energy) also being information.

his computer seems to have stumbled upon before crashing, he begins to undergo further transformations. His 'attacks', which began as a result of staring into the sun, become more frequent and more intense. He begins to have strange and disturbing visions as well as blackouts. And he discovers a strange growth on the side of his head. Once he realizes that these changes have something to do with the possession (or knowledge) of the 216 digit 'pattern' (at the middle of which we eventually see the number-string 3-1-4), he understands that this is what the investment company is looking for, this is what the Cabalistic mystics want him to help them find, that this is what lay at the core of his many years of research, and that this is the same number that gave his mentor a stroke during his earlier research on patterns in pi and that will kill him (the mentor) when he resumes the research in pursuit of the number again. Max has the revelation that this 216 digit number is the true name of God and that it is to be found everywhere in nature; that this number, which is God's (the Other's) true name is also at the very core of nature's language, mathematics. Thus, we have the Cartesian dynamic meeting the Lacanian dynamic illustrated at the location of Max in the film:

Cartesian subject	sense perception	God
subject	wall of language	Other
Max	mathematics/nature[147]	God

In this, mathematics serves as a language - "the language of nature" - and the medium through which we understand nature, through which we can chart it in a coherent manner. It is the primary language/medium through which Max perceives things. Thus in this portrayal of language, we have 'real' language ("the language of nature" – of the Other) and imaginary language (Max's interaction with and location within the language of mathematics) as structured in Lacan's Schema L.

In *The Matrix*, we also find that we are able to plug the narrative into a similar schema. In "Finding God In *The Matrix*," Paul Fontana puts forth the question, "Where is

[147] Again, all things in this narrative are natural/belong to the 'natural' world from Max's point of view and from what the narrative attempts to convey (the stock market, for example).

God in the Matrix?" The problem, as he starts by pointing out, is that there is no mention of God throughout the narrative, though he suggests that we might be able to locate God by plotting other coordinates in relation to where we would expect to find God. I would propose the initial schema:

Cartesian subject	sense perception	God
subject	wall of language	Other
humans	the Matrix (digital code)	God/Other

His suggestion that we view the narrative according to first-century apocalyptic thought brought me to think on the trajectory and culminative event in the apocalyptic tradition, within which there are two main (connected) elements being staged at apocalypse: the battle between good and evil, between heaven and hell; and the moment of judgment, in which all people dead and alive will be judged according to their lives and cast into ruin with the rest of the eternally damned or placed at the side of the saved, who will all together rise again and live in paradise. This is essentially what is at stake in much of the *Matrix* trilogy. Neo, as the savior, has been employed to free the people of Zion and to free the entire human race, most of which is unwittingly trapped in the service of the evil machines. What the trajectory of the films aims at is precisely a decisive battle between the forces of good, and those of evil:[148] The good humans against the bad machines. As we know, there are exceptions on both sides. There are 'bad humans', such as Cipher, and there are good machines, such as the Oracle (a program). Though we can take this a step further. It becomes still more interesting when we begin to plot Neo and his meaning in relation to the human, the Matrix, and God. As the graph suggests, the location of God or the Other would be the location where we would find the machines. They are on the Other side of the wall of language as represented by the Matrix and they determine the Matrix. This is where we would want to consider Neo's role. If we read him as the savior

[148] Where the third installment is brilliant is in the debunking of this myth, which we will come to later.

within Biblical mythology, which we are certainly compelled and even encouraged to, we must determine that he is, as a Christ figure, the component *God's human manifestation* within the trinity. In following Fontana's suggestion to map the coordinates of where we would expect to find God, we would then ask, what is Neo and where does he come from?

As we know, Neo is continually referred to as 'the anomaly' in *Reloaded*. That is, he cannot properly be categorized (neither in the human nor in the computer generated). We are also told that he is a "sum…. inherent to the system." In these terms, we can see that Neo, a systemic anomaly, belongs to the system, comes from the system, and is intended to return to (the source of) the system. Thus, reading Neo as Christ-like savior and mapping the coordinates of his characteristics with those attributed to Christ, we would be lead to the conclusion that 'the system' is God. We might think of this in accord with a conception of God, put forth by Descartes in one of his tests for God's existence, as a malign entity whose intent is to deceive humans.[149] This has the very same structure as conspiracy: conspired against (Cartesian) subject - conspiracy (sense perception) - conspiratorial agent/Other (malign God). By the same token, with Descartes' malign God, intent on deceiving humans by means of a perception that divides them from the 'real' world around them, we find traces of the Lacanian split subject here in Descartes' *First Philosophy*.

In "City of Glass," Auster also employs the concept of fallacious sense perception, at first by a sort of negative inference:

> Quinn picked up the Marco Polo and started reading the first page again. 'We will set down things seen as seen, things heard as heard, so that our book may be an accurate record, free from any sort of fabrication. And all who read this book or hear it may do so with full confidence, because it contains nothing but the truth.' Just as Quinn was beginning to ponder the meaning of these sentences, to turn their crisp assurances over in his mind, the telephone rang.[150]

[149] Discussing the fallibility of the senses, and thus the mind, Descartes writes, "I will suppose that therefore not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me," (pp. 15) though immediately preceding this he states that an omnipotent and benevolent god would not let him be deceived in such a manner.
[150] Pp. 6.

Not incidentally, this phone call is what initiates Quinn's decent into the deceptive realm of the senses, multiplied multiple identities and finally into madness and despair, until the "crisp assurances" of these sentences ring with a high level of irony. We have reference to complications between outer appearance and 'actuality' again when Quinn meets Virginia Stillman for the first time and is trying to make sense of some of her actions: "was it just his own mind trying to sabotage him again?"[151] Not dissimilar in its implications (and in its negative inference, for these conditions will also soon be entirely inverted and the statement will read more ironically than anything else) is the following passage from "Ghosts," in which the question of outward appearances and actuality is framed in reference to language:

> His method is to stick to outward facts, describing events as though each word tallied exactly with the thing described, and to question the matter no further. Words are transparent for him, great windows that stand between him and the world, and until now they have never impeded his view, have never seemed to be there.[152]

This, again, implicates various problems concerning perception and how we think via perception (via language).[153] The beginning of this passage reads first in the direction of Descartes: one must strive to 'stick to the facts', and to do so, one mustn't allow oneself as *mediator* to interfere (an impossible task). The passage is also reminiscent of Plato's allegory of the cave wherein which the problem of the relationship between observer, a representation of a thing, and a thing itself is originally posed. If we move the implications of Plato's allegory into Lacanian terms (as Lacan himself does), then we end up precisely with *the word* as it does not tally "exactly with the thing described." Here, rather, is where we have a fundamental difference in orders, the symbolic (the word) and the real (the thing). By following the logic, again by negative inference, or by paying particular attention to "until now" in this statement, of the second sentence in this quote, we end up heading toward the third (or 'other') order: the imaginary. When one finds oneself properly ('comfortably') within the symbolic, words can indeed seem to be great

[151] Pp. 31.
[152] Pp. 146. This is also a mirroring of Stillman senior's project.
[153] Note again Descartes here re. perception and thinking: "what is called 'having sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking" (pp. 19).

transparent windows. That is, one does not doubt the authenticity and efficiency *of their significance*; one is comfortable within the function of the word. It is precisely when one begins to doubt one's relation to the word (thus, to the Other) and the word's efficacy that the windows turn to mirrors. Explication of this condition is the central project in *The New York Trilogy*. It is here (in the register on the imaginary) that "instead of drawing out the facts and making them sit palpably in the world, [words] have induced them to disappear," that "words do not necessarily work, that it is possible for them to obscure the things they are trying to say" (147-8). But here we are already moving toward a consideration of the order of the imaginary. Before we do so, we want to consider more closely the condition essential to the Lacanian subject: the condition of being split.

The Split Subject: $

We will stay with the first installment of Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, "City of Glass," as it is perhaps the one most blatantly concerned with language and subjectivity: it is openly interested in individuals as they are either 'within' or 'without' language.

The protagonist Quinn, working under the assumed identity of Paul Auster, detective, is hired to protect Peter Stillman junior, a rather peculiar individual with a rather peculiar past, from his father, who has recently been released from prison. Shortly after his mother died when Stillman junior was but a few years old, his father locked him away in total isolation. For nine years, he was neither to see the light of day, nor, and here is the point, to have discourse with a single person. The reason for his isolation: he was to play a key role in his father's research into a universal, 'natural' language. Stillman senior, a professor of theology, believed that in prelapsarian times there was a direct correlation between names and things. His hypothesis was that if an innocent human were to have no contact with the corrupting elements of the outer world, including languages, he would eventually begin to speak the 'true' names of things.[154]

[154] To hypothesize a 'true' 'natural' language is to misunderstand what the 'nature' of language is: arbitrary. Don DeLillo's *the Names* compliments the already considerable history of fictional commentaries on the mystification of language, or language as having some abstract, magical qualities beyond the reach of the

As with *Pi*, the narrative indicates an attempt to find a break in language, or to 'conquer' language in some capacity, and thereby come in contact with God (Other) - or, the 'world as God intended it' - which in turn would lead to a change in the 'natural' state of things. By finding man's "true natural language," one rids the world of the word in that one rids the world of representation. Thus, if the word and the thing become one and the same, language becomes material. Consider, for example, the legend of the Golem of Prague: is it not precisely this that takes place as the rabbi inscribes the name of God onto the earthen brow of the Golem? Language becomes material. A word imbues inorganic matter with life energy, changing it essentially. A passage in "City of Glass" comes directly to the same point: "Adam's one task in the Garden had been to invent language, to give each creature and thing its name. In that state of innocence, his tongue had gone straight to the quick of the world. His words had not been merely appended to the things he saw, they had revealed their essences, had literally brought them to life. A thing and its name were interchangeable" (43). In fact, is not the myth of creation in the Judeo-Christian tradition also precisely about language becoming material, and this in relation to God or the capacity that God's language (the natural language) holds? "God said 'let there be light', and there was light" (Gen. i. 3.). Though "[a]fter the fall… Names became detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs; language had been severed from God. The story of the Garden, therefore, not only records the fall of man, but the fall of language" (Auster, pp. 43). Or conversely, the story of the expulsion records the rise of language as a system of representation, as the rise of *knowledge*. A passage from "Ghosts" might help here to illuminate what is at stake in this originary myth of the acquisition of knowledge:

> Such is the way of the world: one step at a time, one word and then the next. There are certain things that Blue can't possibly know at this point. For knowledge comes slowly, and when it comes, *it is often at great personal expense*.[155]

Here we are prompted to read knowledge of the world as knowledge of the word, and thus we might map the statement back onto Lacan: knowledge of the world/word comes

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human; that is, implicitly, language as an autonomous entity (or 'tool') as opposed to something inseparable from thought.

[155] Pp. 136. Italics mine.

at great personal expense. As we discussed in the section "Lacan's *Vel* and Determinism," the Lacanian subject must sacrifice her/his *self* in the name of the Other's desire, thus gaining subjectivity. In addition, being split by language, there certainly "are certain things that Blue [the subject] can't possibly know:" One is both cut off from the real, and likewise denied access to (though not removed from) the Other.

If we relate this statement about knowledge and personal expense back to "City of Glass,"[156] it leads us directly to the myth of the expulsion from the garden. We know that it is because of knowledge gained that Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden and made mortal – their 'great personal expense'. And to further unknot this piece of narrative, we also know that the knowledge they gained was knowledge of language (representation); or, to be precise, the capacity for abstract thinking: before the expulsion, there was no difference between a thing and its name, or, "A thing and its name were interchangeable." Thus, language was material, not representative. In this sense, 'the word' was distinct from language as we understand it: it was not an abstraction, but rather the thing itself. It is only after the fall that 'the word' takes on its representative capacity, that it becomes something abstract and arbitrary. In biblical mythology, there is an event at the time of the fall that illustrates this move from *essential being* (immortality; *thing*-ness), to abstraction (mortality; representation):

> The man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God walking about in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and they hid from him among the trees. The Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?' He replied, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.' God said, 'Who told you you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree which I forbade you to eat from?'[157]

We know, of course, that the man has. And that it is because of this that the man can have some concept of his nakedness, whereas before this newly acquired 'knowledge', he could not have (he simply was what he was). The acquisition of knowledge allows him to think in abstraction (or dialectically): the knowledge, 'I am naked' also includes the

[156] Which we are likewise prompted to do, as Auster explains that the three stories in the collection are, after a manner, one story told three different ways: "These three stories are finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is about" (294).
[157] Genesis iii, 8-11.

possibility of not being naked.[158] Upon perceiving this split in man (a split by language, into representation and abstraction), God realizes that a vital change has taken place, that the irreversible has come to pass.

The movement from (or difference of) immortality to mortality is also already a movement from 'thingness' to representation *per se*. With mortality, we are automatically in the realm of the binary, of the dialectic: life / death. It is rooted in representation insofar as any idea of one already includes an idea of the other. Immortality, on the other hand, is not representation, it is not within language, it simply is what it is, to recall God's utterance, "I am what I am" (also translated as "I am that which is;" i.e. not split, based in lack, and decentred). In not being of a dialectical nature, immortality has no 'outside' or *other* by which it might be determined, and thus move into representation. It is this distinction between 'thingness' and representation that Stillman senior is concerned with, as we see in his theory (based on Biblical mythology) of non-representative 'language' that corresponds to the actual materiality of things.

In reference to his task of finding the 'true natural language', Stillman senior tells Quinn, "You see, the world is in fragments, sir. And my job is to put it back together again" (p.76). This again speaks to the arbitrariness of names: words ascribed to (signify) a certain thought/image. Also in this regard, "our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words remain the same" (77). Of course, things never were whole insofar as they have any relation to language or thought. The "put it back together again" here is clearly a reference to Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, who surfaces a couple of pages later, when Stillman explains the significance of the initials HD (for Henry Dark) to Quinn: "Humpty Dumpty. You know who I mean. The egg." And Quinn replies, "As in 'Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall'?" Then Stillman goes on to explain that the wall Humpty Dumpty sat on was, after a manner, Lacan's Wall of Language, and that when he (HD) speaks a word, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."[159]

[158] Not unlike Freud's discovery of his nephew's 'fort - da' game.
[159] Pp. 81. Quoting Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.

Quinn addresses the nature of the connection between things and language early on in the story when he drives through Central Park, wondering "if these were the same trees that Peter Stillman saw when he walked out into the air and light. He wondered if Peter saw the same things he did, or whether the world was a different place for him. And if a tree was not a tree, he wondered what it really was" (36). This piece of narrative potentially spins off into a couple of directions. First of all, there is the suggestion in the last sentence that the things around us are different in their essence from what they are as we perceive them through language. This is a nod in the direction of the Lacanian real: things have their *thing-ness*, an essence outside of representation, beyond our symbolic understanding of them. Additionally, there is the suggestion that the information one person's sensory input relays to his mind, to his thinking, differs from the way it is processed by another person's senses. Here again we have the conundrum of the Cartesian circle: we can only be sure of something insofar as our mind tells us 'it is true', though by the same token, our mind depends on our undependable senses for the input of 'raw material' that it uses to decide what is true. In postmodern theory, we would say that this difference in perception is based in the way we each necessarily read signs (and interpret gaps in the chain of signification) differently; based in the fact that we are all situated differently within language. Thus, one person's truth differs from another's. Or to put it another way, one person's tree differs from another's.

Being Chosen

In Aronofski's *Pi*, when Max becomes fully aware of what he is in possession of - the true name of God - he tries to make sense of his location in relation to it when he is taken to a temple inhabited by the Cabalistic Hassidic Jews. There the rabbi Cohen informs Max that he is a vessel with a delivery for them from their God, and that only he who is pure can intone this name he has 'found'. Max accuses them of being no purer than himself, and states that he has the name of God inside him and that it is changing him, to

which the rabbi responds, “it’s killing you.”[160] Max’s response to this is that he in particular “was chosen.” Max’s insistence on his ‘being chosen’ is typical to such conspiracy narratives, where our subject is always ‘chosen’, from being the Christ-like chosen *One* in *The Matrix*, to being chosen to perform a task via an ‘accidental’ phone call in "City of Glass." In all cases we have something resembling a symbolic mandate (the task) set out by the Other (the conspiratorial agent) for the subject (the conspired against subject). Once the individual is 'chosen' to perform a task, two lines of inquiry normally ensue: one involving the task to be accomplished - what is it precisely, what is the meaning of it, and how does one go about accomplishing it - and one involving the motivating agent behind the mandate - who/what is this agent and what is its connection to me? Thus, what ensues is a search for the big Other. Žižek ascribes the prevalence of this search for the Other, the trajectory of which in these narratives moves from the point of an awareness of being within language (or 'being chosen' - being called into subjectivity) onward toward a necessity to crack the code of the language, thereby dropping its concealing veil, to the “retreat of the big Other.” When we consider this, it is clear that in all of these narratives, our protagonist is searching for some organizing principal that will give special/specific meaning to his/her life. This also recalls Fenster's agency panic, an element of which is a search for a structuring principle, or, as Jan Delasara put it, "some kind of personally satisfying order for themselves and for their own lives."[161] One of the ways in which we might read the idea of a retreat of the big Other is the cultural retreat of the big Other insofar as postmodernism lacks the authoritative law-giving Father (or 'realizes' the lack thereof) and the authoritative-scriptive mOther. There is also the point that the big Other does not actually exist as an actual entity that one can have access to (the barred Other), but rather as a function (which might nonetheless be enacted of represented through real persons). The point, though, is that what these narratives expose - through this search for a big Other - indicate that something is going wrong with the function of the big Other. As Žižek indicates, they expose a problem with the structuring of meaning in our lives. It is precisely this that conspiracy narratives throw into relief: what do the conditions of my

[160] Here also, the narrative exposes real characteristics of the Other: his crossing to the 'Other side' is a traumatic encounter (and results in his death).
[161] *PopLit, PopCult and The X-Files: A Critical Exploration*, pp 200.

life mean and who, ultimately, is responsible for them? As I noted earlier, this is an ontological problem. This is as much as to say that with the many freedoms offered by postmodernism's 'anything goes', we seem not to be able to do without some clear images of the traditional socio-symbolic Other in our cultural economy. As a result, we see a plethora of reactionary impulses revealed in our cultural narratives, such as the search for the Other. When taken literally, such a pursuit is wrong-headed and doomed from the outset: the individual is in a position of searching for that which, by definition, it cannot actually find, and thus of potentially in danger of projecting an imaginary landscape.[162] We will see that, true to life as the narratives we tell often are, many of the conspiracy narratives we are reading here end up precisely at such an impasse.

Symbolic or Imaginary?

As obvious as it might seem to read the Matrix program in *The Matrix* as a trope for the order of the symbolic, in certain aspects the Matrix is less properly symbolic than it is imaginary. As we know, we cannot actually divide any of the orders, as they are inseparably intermingled and interdependent. Heeding caution, I should perhaps note that, in fact, there always seems to be a great deal of imaginary within the symbolic; or to put it another way, the structure of the symbolic, which we so often talk about in terms that suggest a preference to this order in connection with being socially 'well adjusted' (for obvious reasons), is highly dependant on imaginary developments and structures at its most essential consistency. The imaginary is not something one simply passes through on the way to the symbolic. Rather, it is a functional agent 'within' the symbolic, were the subject is as much dependant on the presence of others (a, a') as it is on the function of Others (A, Ⱥ). That said, what I wish to suggest with my initial statement is that, beyond the necessary function and presence of the imaginary within the symbolic, there are

[162] I should make a distinction between the barred Other that defines because the subject is within its syntax without questioning and the individual who questions (is resistant to) being in the syntax of the Other, wants proof and location of the Other. It is, of course, the latter I am referring to here: the individual who is resistant to the syntax of the Other finds itself in a position of crisis similar to the 'freeform' postmodern subjects whose narratives appear to be individually written by others as opposed to written *en masse* by social collective Others.

certain aspects of the matrix that suggest a purer adherence to the imaginary. A distinction here is essential: As with alienation, wherein which an imaginary identification is the essential modicum for the advent of the ego, 'too much' imaginary (or too extreme an alienation) is what constitutes psychosis. Thus, in looking for traces of the imaginary in these narratives, we want to be aware of suggestions of an overtly strong adherence to this order. In *The Matrix Trilogy*, this becomes explicit in the scene from the first film, for example, when Cipher betrays the others and explains the type of life he wishes to lead within the Matrix. That he can simply be reinserted into the Matrix without disrupting the space of other individuals connected to the Matrix poses two possibilities concerning the structure of the Matrix: Either the Matrix is a structure bound entirely to imaginary principals, or the Matrix has no memory.

The Matrix has no memory:

If Cipher can reenter the Matrix with no memory of anything, neither of who he had been nor what he had done, but simply reassigned a new identity on a fresh palette, so to speak, then this means that the other individuals in the Matrix are plugged into a program that continually shifts the conditions of existence within it (continually alters the narratives) from a position that is chronologically multidirectional. This is to say, the Matrix has no historical memory. If Cipher can reenter the Matrix without remembering anything of his past, then no one within the Matrix can remember anything of his past either, otherwise his past existence would conflict with his present one. There would be two parallel Ciphers. Thus, in addition to the erasing of his own memory (which isn't so much the point in question), the Cipher that betrayed the others is erased from the 'memory' of the Matrix, and in this sense, the Matrix has no (historical) memory, or, it only has a memory, like the memory of a computer, to the extent that the 'programmers' tell it what its history consists of.

The Matrix as a structure bound within imaginary parameters:

In the other possibility, we would have to view the Matrix as a system to which all (or most – those that accept the program) individuals are plugged in, but which allows for variation on the 'reality' of each individual's experience within the Matrix. That is, the program into which all are plugged can regulate the experience within it and can function on a mass and general (macro) scale, offering a predictable amount of regularity, though its conditions must leave space for fluctuation and variation on the (micro) scale of the individual (this is precisely how fractal geometry functions; a theme which will become prominent in the final installment of the trilogy). It must perform this in order for each individual experience within the Matrix to be customized and mutable without posing a threat to the stability of other 'realities' within it: if the Matrix provides a skeletal (minimally social) infrastructure that is not dependant on interrelation or intersubjectivity, then Cipher can be reinserted into the Matrix bearing his imaginary fantasy ("someone important, like an actor;" notably, someone with a high level of visibility) without disrupting the preexisting space/history/memory of others. We might thus perceive the Matrix as having a superstructure program, and several smaller programs which provide each individual with tailored information concerning their existence and it's relation to the 'world around' it. Thus we would be dealing with a purely imaginary structure where there is not even a need for a mediating and forbidding Other because the 'others' within this fantasy space are *actually and purely* phantoms, allowing every individual to live within their own phantasmatic space, among mirrors.

Along similar lines, if we consider the structure of Maximillian Cohen's life in *Pi*, we quickly perceive that he lives within a highly 'imaginary' space (as do many of our conspired against subjects). Like Neo in the beginning of *The Matrix*, he spends his time locked up in his apartment working with computers; he hasn't any friends outside his onetime teacher and mentor; he apparently doesn't have a job (where Neo initially does, dividing his time/life between night and day, as Jack in *Fight Club*); he doesn't have any family as far as we know; he rejects those who show interest in his work, and so on. This is to say, he closes himself off, as far as possible, from symbolic relations and symbolic

mandates.[163] Over the course of the film, he turns away potential friends and a potential romantic interest (who tells him "you need a mother"), repeatedly turns down the offer of work, and avoids involvement with the religious community he would belong to. Once it becomes explicit to him that he is unquestionably being 'called' (into subjectivity?) by something (he has the distinct feeling that something is haunting him), he agrees to engage the people he previously rejected in order to find out what it is he is being called to and who, exactly, he is being called by. Through his brief and volatile engagement with others, he is able to formulate an idea of who/what he is being called by (of who his Other is), at which point he again rejects the *others* he had provisionally engaged, moving him again further from symbolic relations and restricting him to phantasmatic space, in an attempt to directly commune with an Other. Here is a good example of how symbolic relations are dependant on imaginary elements. In order to engage in symbolic relation, Max must surround himself with others, some of who bear a strong resemblance to himself, or resemble manifestations of both his desires and fears; that is, act as mirrors. In Max we explicitly see the difference between a necessary receptiveness to the imaginary, on the one hand, and on the other, a more extreme form of adherence to the imaginary which results in psychosis. This attempt to directly access an Other, as it is portrayed in these narratives, generally has the outcome of the conspired against subject finding himself in what appears to be a rather imaginary, phantasmatic space and subsequently dying (which we might read as a trope for dying a symbolic death). We can read death under these circumstances in a couple of ways: In the rejection of symbolic relations and mandates, and an attempt to establish the ego-subject with a status like the symbolic-subject, but from without symbolic space, this is symbolic suicide. Additionally, we can read the attempt to directly engage the Other as an attempt, after a manner, to complete the Other, or, rather, to complete the signifying chain, the lack in the signifier: where there is no lack, there is pure jouissance, 'too much' enjoyment, which expunges the subject. In any case, the individual is faced with the fact of the symbolic being based on

[163] Notably, there is no mention of a father, and the only mention of his mother is in regard to a forbiddance she established, telling him never to stare into the sun, and his transgression of this forbiddance. In this sense we are lacking an 'incarnation' of the function of the Other on all accounts, whether mOther or Father, as well as the presence of a 'replacement' such as an authoritative employer or religious authority. Even where his teacher/mentor is concerned, Max does not heed his advice.

lack, and he cannot assimilate this lack.[164] At such a moment we once again come up against what is necessarily the end of a narrative precisely because the potential for the dynamic subject/barred Other, upon which the narrative had been based, comes to a halt. Toward the end of *Pi*, we see Max in a fit of rage destroying his apartment and all his computer and research equipment while speaking the number which should be God's true name. Then (as we will later see in *Matrix* when the characters are plugged in but a program has yet to be loaded – that is, they are in a space without language in use, with no signification), he is suddenly transported to a blank white space occupied only by him. Here, he continues to intone the name of God, but calmly now, until we see a twitch of his head and realize that something is calling him back to the other world. This shot cuts to one of a woman's hand holding his and then to the woman holding him in her arms and rocking him like a child. It is his neighbor, Devi, who had previously told Max he needs a mother and who, throughout the film, is portrayed as mother figure (feeding Max and taking care of him when she can, which means when he is unable to stop her) and object of desire. Subsequently, when he returns from this blank space, we see Max sitting on his bed alone in his wrecked apartment and embracing and rocking himself back and forth, with no sign of Devi. This development encourages us to read Devi in this scene as the Devi that exists in Max's imaginary relation to her as being that which calls Max to the world of his apartment. In other words, it is his imaginary desire that calls him back from this 'real' space.[165] Subsequently, Max goes into the bathroom, looks into the mirror, burns the piece of paper with the 216-digit number on it and kills himself, all the while standing before the mirror. The end of the film is slightly ambiguous in terms of how to locate him in relation to the Lacanian orders.

After Max drills a hole through his skull, there is a black screen and then a scene that recalls one earlier in the film, though Max himself has been altered. He is sitting on a

[164] This brings us back to the point of humanoids acting as ideal mirrors: they explicitly signify the condition of lack, and thus are "more human than human."

[165] I refer to this space as real because, as narratives go, I think it comes closest to suggesting the real. The problem is, of course, that we cannot properly talk about the real per se nor portray it; we cannot signify it because it is precisely that which resists signification, that which cannot be symbolized. Thus, when we are presented with this 'blank space', we are aiming at 'non-representation', a representation of space in which there is no representation. We might also postulate here that his imaginary desire calls him back from his 'real' desire, taking the standpoint that *real* desire is driven toward that which traumatically disrupts the symbolic und ultimately fills the gap in the signifier (this can be thought of in regard to the "only completely successful act" - suicide - according to Lacan).

park bench looking up at a tree. Earlier in the film (toward the beginning), as he looked at the tree, he pondered how there are patterns everywhere in nature, and as the camera pulls back and we see from Max's point of view, the movement from one leaf, to a bunch of leaves, to the entire tree should suggest a pattern of the whole tree repeated in each branch and each leaf (similar to the fractal 'real' world of light Neo witnesses toward the end of *Revolutions*, or to the anomaly in the Matrix being systemic); or to put it another way, that there is a precise metonymy at work in the natural world. Where this was disturbing for Max in the earlier scene, he now sits on the bench gazing at the tree calmly. Then, Jenna, a child from a neighboring apartment, asks him difficult multiplication problems while solving them on her calculator, to which he smilingly answers, "I don't know, what is it," as if he has been transformed into the Buddha enlightened by his total lack of knowledge, where earlier he would have immediately given the correct answer in his usual neurotic manner. So, while on the one hand we read the suicide scene as the 'truly successful act' that occurs as a result of going 'beyond the pleasure principle' (the removal of distance regulated through desire, and thus the removal of desire), we might also read the final five minutes as a trope for an enlightened entry into the symbolic. With this reading, we might posit that when he is called back from his *tête à tête* encounter with God, his Other (here visualized as *nothing*), he returns according to a desire to be in the symbolic exchange with and company of *others*, represented first by Devi.[166] Then he enters the bathroom and murders his mirror image (kills his 'self' while standing before the mirror), after which he is in a space where he is comfortable with his surroundings and engaging in symbolic play with the neighboring child (where as earlier the 'exchange' was imaginary or one sided – Max seeing exclusively himself in the question and not taking into consideration the child's place in the exchange).

One can readily find parallels to such a scene in other narratives like *Fight Club* (Jack 'kills' Tyler), *Terminator 3* (Terminator kills T-X), and, inverted – the alter-ego kills the ego – in *Solaris*. What is often at stake in these narratives is the loss of the individual's ability to accept symbolic mandates, engage symbolic others, and be called as a subject

[166] Again, this is ambiguous in that it is also portrayed as imaginary on several levels: first, it is a projection or fantasy of his; second, it is libidinal, and libidinal drives are related to the ego and the imaginary; third, she is portrayed in a motherly aspect as mother with infant, not as mOther, and thus on an imaginary level.

into the symbolic without being troubled by what the Other is – that is, by a fear being determined by something *else*. What we continually see played out is a mistrust of that which may determine a subject, and this mistrust is often connected to fear concerning authenticity.[167] That is, the mistrust is rooted in the individual's unwillingness to accept that there is an external agent, or agents, determining her/his identity as opposed to identity being something springing 'naturally' from within. Or, to put it another way, the individuals are unwilling to be the "instruments of the Other's…jouissance."[168] The logical consequence of these misgivings is, in somewhat simplified terms, rejection of symbolic relations and reversion (regression) to imaginary space, where the subject does indeed determine its identity, though it is an imaginary one, one that shrinks from the social. Thus, though the closing scene from *Pi* might be suggestive of a possible entry into symbolic relations (something we also witness at the end of *Fight Club*), that which has lead up to it undermines such a reading, suggesting rather a utopic fantasy ('heaven'), a 'return' to the imaginary.[169]

Return of the Imaginary!

The mirror stage consists in "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image," which instantly also pushes him toward the symbolic (which is all of a sudden all around him), opening up the world of *my-self* within representation. From this moment, the individual is within the universe of the symbolic: that is, the individual is cut off from the real (the real breast, for example) and the universe is irreversibly structured by representation. I want to make clear that this does not equal proper entry into symbolic relations. Though the individual is in the *universe* of the symbolic, of representation, this does not equal maintaining a position as subject in the *world* and network of symbolic relations and fictions; nor does it preclude the possibility of

[167] The trajectory is also reversed in *Solaris*. There is a movement from symbolic space to imaginary space and a rejection of the 'authentic' in favor of the phantasmatic.
[168] Slavoj Žižek: "The Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion."
[169] Parallels might here again be drawn to the end of *Solaris*, *13th Floor*, and *The Truman Show*.

complications in the transition from (dualistic) imaginary relations to (triangulated) symbolic ones.

It is with the rejection of the possibility or potential function of the Other ('agent' of triangulation and the regulation of desire) as a result of any of a number of possible crises related to it (the culturally missing Other, crisis in authenticity and 'refusal' to be determined by an Other…) that the subject attempts a reversion or reverts to certain imaginary conditions desperately in search of *re-identification*. We might posit that the individual dives down into itself (even if this means multifarious hysterical identification in the 'outer' world - cf. Allen's *Zelig*) in search of its 'authentic' *imago*. Herein lies the crux of crises related to authenticity (see ch. 1): an *imago* is always a reflection and, moreover, the inner kernel of authenticity that the individual seeks or hopes for is always some place *else* (*autre*). To achieve anything like the authenticity the individual in question has in mind would involve a move into a position of subject within the symbolic. Rather than being constituted by an 'authentic inner kernel', the individual gives himself up (unconsciously) to the desire of the Other, thereby constituting an extimate kernel (of desire) through something 'out there' and 'not me', though at my very center (with exception to madness, in which the *imago* remains in a strictly reflexive state, excising the Other from the equation, and the individual is determined by strict adherence to the image with no outer/Other referent).

Concerning the ideational link between conspiracy and a rejection of the Other, we should note the following quote from Freud: "But the revolt against this 'censoring agency' [parental criticism, societal norms…] arises out of the subject's desire (in accordance with the fundamental character of his illness) to liberate himself from all these influences… His conscience then confronts him in a regressive form as a hostile influence from without."[170] We know that the realm of the Other *is* the realm of the symbolic, and until now we have discussed conspiracy as a potential trope for the symbolic. What I propose now is that, in placing the conspired against subject in the realm of the imaginary as opposed to the symbolic, we read an over-determination in these narratives, in which, in the subjects mind, there is a really existing Other who is an external agent with external agency (the government, a corporation, an individual;

[170] *Freud Reader*, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," pp. 559.

Freud's regressive conscience in the form of a "hostile influence from without"). Although an external entity may represent the function (the desire) of the Other, the function of the Other is always an internal agency (Freud's "censoring agency"). That is, it determines the subject not from a location external to the subject, as is most often portrayed in conspiracy narratives, but internally, as something digested by the subject and determining the subject's being-in-the-(symbolic) world (cf. Freud's superego). Sticking with conspiracy, there is an example that might be useful to us here. If we call to mind Orwell's thought police, we immediately find parallels to the castrative Other functioning from within. The function of the thought police is not so much to actively make one sensor one's thoughts, as it is to 'nip the problem in the bud', so to speak; that is, it functions more as an originary agency of castration than a reactionary agent of control. What is often portrayed in conspiracy narratives is an over-identification with social-symbolic Others, meaning those in the Althusserian sense of ideological state apparatuses - one imagines oneself to be the focal point of a government or corporate conspiracy, for example, and that these Others equally determine the status of all subjects subject to them (in the *Matrix*, for example, every 'subject' is determined by the conspiratorial machines, even those not plugged into the Matrix, their life and lifestyle are determined based on their relationship to the machines). In this type of structure, the individual is lost in an imaginary location: over-determination of the Other (meaning a conscious awareness of Other desire and an ascription of an external body - *excorporation*) and over-identification with others excludes one from proper symbolic relationships. Such individuals are, in a manner, stuck in the realm of the imaginary.

In *Fight Club*, this condition is explicated through an embracing of purely imaginary and uncanny space: the individual 'externalizes' his psychological split, properly, his ideal 'mirror' self (structured more closely on ego-drives and less on superego restraint). *The Matrix* repeatedly makes the claim that what we think is symbolic space is really an imaginary landscape, as do *Time Out of Joint*, *The Truman Show*, *The Thirteenth Floor* (*Simulacron 3)*, and *eXistenZ*.[171] Donner's *Conspiracy Theory* interestingly starts from a

[171] *Matrix, Thirteenth Floor*, and *eXistenZ* perform this repeatedly by obfuscating what is imaginary space and what not. While *Thirteenth Floor* and *eXistenZ* are explicit here – one moves from one level of reality, virtual reality, to another level of 'reality' only to find that it is still a virtual reality and becomes unable to

point within imaginary space and emerges into the symbolic to expose the malevolent big Other, though one might also argue that this narrative never actually moves toward the conspired against subject's entering symbolic space: His death is faked in order to protect certain people, he 'gets the girl' he's been dreaming of, foils the bad guys… Basically, it's another 'happy' ending in which all of the tensions in the narrative are relaxed, all of the 'desires' realized. In any case, what these narratives do share is some sort of fear of a big Other, which implicitly contains the desire for 'a' big Other (A - not the barred Other, but a order-providing 'agent'). The individuals in these narratives find themselves 'subject' to a certain threat.

Mourning the Other

In Auster's "Ghosts," Blue recalls a story he read in a magazine in which a young man, while skiing in the French Alps, finds himself near the spot where his father disappeared some twenty-five years earlier. The young man 'chances upon' a body in the ice, only to find, horrifically, that it is his father looking back at him, dead and preserved in the ice: "The dead man was still young, even younger than his son was now, and there was something awesome about it, Blue felt, something so odd and terrible about being older than your own father, that he actually had to fight back tears as he read the article" (151). This passage is collocated within the diegetic trajectory alongside Blue's 'epiphanies' concerning how language obscures and at the height of his identification with his mirror projection, Black.[172] What is it about this event that Blue is so moved by? What is it that he identifies with? There is something particularly disturbing about the son being older than the father, having 'outlived' him in a rather unconventional manner. As we know, the father, in his symbolic capacity, can stand in at the symbolic location of the castrative Other. We are told that when the son first looks at the face in the ice, he has the impression he is looking at himself, at a mirror. Thus, what was once the location of the

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determine the difference – *Matrix* prompts its reader to question weather or not the characters are simply always in the Matrix - that is, whether there is no outside of the Matrix.

[172] "There are moments when he feels so completely in harmony with Black, so naturally at one with the other man, that to anticipate what black is going to do…he need merely look into himself" (156).

Other has suddenly and radically shifted into mirror space, and the son finds himself 'beyond the Other', after a manner. It is not that the son has assumed or himself superceded the position that the father held (that the son is in an *Other* position), but rather that the father has covertly stolen into the position of the son (the *other* position), leaving vacant the location of the Other. This vacancy is precisely what speaks (or rather precisely what does not speak) to Blue, who likewise finds himself isolated from his 'Others' (one of the sentences that follows reads, "he wishes to God that his father could be there…telling him stories") and from the world (the end of the paragraph reads, "[t]hat's what happens when you have no one to talk to"). Thus what we witness in this passage is some kind of mourning of the Other.

Where does this leave us?

In *Ethics of the Real*, Alenka Zupančič discusses Kant's reception of the (public) execution of king Louis XVI and the (symbolic) repercussions this 'act' has on the people ('subjects' to the thrown). She tells us that "in Kant's example, the French people 'commit suicide' because they have annihilated what, in the Other, gave them their symbolic identity" (86). By giving him a formal execution, as opposed to simply murdering him, the people kill him while still recognizing him in his 'formal' capacity – his symbolic capacity in relation to the State, as the symbolic head, the Other, of the State (the Other of the Other). Thus, the people, being subjects of this particular Other, the king's 'subjects', commit symbolic suicide by executing that which 'regulates' their "their symbolic existence." Now, I do not intend to imply that any of the characters in this particular story ("Ghosts") execute their Other. Rather, it is instructive here to look at how Zupančič (through Kant) explicates the act of (symbolic) suicide and what it means for the parties involved (the subjects and the Other). What we are left with is a disruption, or, rather, a dissolution of symbolic space: 'The People' turn into the undifferentiated masses.[173] In the case of Blue, and, in fact, in the case of many protagonists in conspiracy narratives, it may yet be more accurate not to say that they commit symbolic suicide, for they often do not 'execute', as it were, the Other. Rather, we might say that

[173] Whereas, had they murdered their king as opposed to murdering the symbolic fiction they and their king together comprised, their would have been a restructuring of symbolic space as opposed to a 'de-structuring' of symbolic space.

they ‘choose’ symbolic exile (which, despite any originary differences, is equal to symbolic suicide in the end) by adhering to the imaginary.[174]

Conspiracy and the Imaginary

Remedios Varo: Bordando el Manto Terrestre / Embroidering Earth’s Mantle, 1961

[174] This is the impossible choice, the choice that is not really an option in Lacan’s *vel*, for it equals psychosis and the forfeiture of subjectivity.

As indicated earlier, in the painting at the sight of which Oedipa Mass breaks down, the mantle can function as a trope for the symbolic on the one level, and on another, the weaving of the fabric is a trope for the paranoiac construction of an all-encompassing conspiracy theory. In this regard, we want to keep in mind a decisive distinction in the possibility of meaning for the character Oedipa: is she finding herself more a part of and within a symbolic network she has been awoken to, has been summoned into, or is she weaving an imaginary universe that is the mirror of her fears and desires? In *Enjoy Your Symptom*, Žižek states that "[t]he imaginary and the symbolic dimension of 'a letter always reaching its destination' are thus in their very opposition closely connected: the first is defined by the imaginary (mis)recognition (a letter arrives at its destination insofar as I recognize myself as its addressee, i.e., insofar as I find *myself* in it), whereas the second comprises the concealed truth that emerges in the 'blind spots' and flaws the imaginary circle." In the symbolic dimension, the letter "reaches us unbeknownst to us" (pp. 18-19). We might posit that Oedipa continually recognizes herself as addressee, thus her terrible frustration and sadness when she finds that she cannot, despite great effort, make the Nefastis machine function, that she is not a 'sensitive': she does not recognize herself in the circuitry of the machine and thus can make no sense of it. In Oedipa, 'the letter' fails to reach her unbeknownst to her precisely because she is always only searching for herself in the letter, always expecting the letter to arrive, thus projecting its arrival and therewith herself into it. So what does this mantle represent? There is indirect reference to it shortly after the description of her encounter with it. We are told that she could "take up a useful hobby like embroidery," (pp. 13) and further on, somewhat more abstractly but more to the point, when she asks herself, "*Shall I project a world?*" (pp. 56). It is instructive to look at this statement in terms of the Lacanian imaginary, in that the imaginary consists in an other that is not really other. It is rather a self-identification in some external one, and, thus, more accurately, a projection. We also know that "the formation of *I* is symbolized in dreams by a fortress" (*Ecrits*, pp.5). We might propose that Oedipa's shock at seeing this painting is suggestive of her identification with it; that in seeing herself in it, she understands or intuits that from the location of her *I*, she is projecting a world independent of an 'external reality'.[175] Coming back to the

[175] Conversely, we might propose that this scene is indicative of the crises concerning authenticity, in which

Tristero/Trystero, we find suggested in the text that, where the tower in which Oedipa imagines herself to be is equated to her ego, and thus to the imaginary (id/real, ego/imaginary, superego/symbolic), it is the Tristero that she emerges into from the tower. That is, she potentially moves from the tower as the ego-imaginary into the symbolic of Tristero: "If one object behind her discovery of what she was to label the Tristero System…were to bring an end to her encapsulation in the [ego] tower, then that night's infidelity with Metzger would logically be the starting point for it; logically. That's what would come to haunt her most, perhaps: the way it fitted, logically, together. As if (as she'd guessed that first minute in San Narciso) there were revelation in progress all around her" (p.29). This is, of course, how the 'logic' of conspiracy works: history is read in retrospection and 'logically', meaningfully, reconstructed - excising contingency. Here we will want to ask if the Tristero functions as a symbolic network, or if it is rather analogous to something imaginary (we will want to, once again, question the validity of Oedipa's statement), another tower. To begin with, it is in regard or relation to the Tristero that Oedipa tries to locate herself; or, it is here (ironically a postal system) that she attempts to locate herself in the letter. Also worth consideration is the fact that these revelations "all around her" begin to take place, that this whole potentially imaginary narrative begins to take place, precisely as soon as she enters San Narciso. I would hazard that, in this regard, the place name signifies more than textual playfulness (Narcissus being the original story of ardent imaginary adherence). What is further notable at this point in the narrative is that it is precisely the moment in the bathroom just prior to seducing Metzger that she literally loses the mirror image of herself, and this is absolutely unbearable: "At some point she went into the bathroom, tried to find her image in the mirror and couldn't. She had a moment of nearly pure terror" (27). She completely depends on the reassurance of her mirror image.[176] Later in the book when she is in a hotel in Berkley, she is shown to her room, where there happens to be a reproduction of the tower painting, and again there is reference to the imaginary: "She fell asleep almost

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the subject is unable to accept the knowledge that it is something/one Other (the figure at the center of the room of embroidering women) that determines its identity and acts as the guiding principle for its existence within the symbolic fabric.

[176] Similarly, atop the particular hotel she chose to stay at is the sexually suggestive figure of a woman who resembles Oedipa. "The subject is no one. It is decomposed, in pieces. And it is jammed, sucked in by the image, the deceiving and realized image, of the other, or equally by its own specular image. That is where it finds its unity" (Lacan, Book II, 54).

at once, but kept waking from a nightmare about something in the mirror, across from her bed" (69).[177] We might read this "something" in regard to Oedipa herself in the mirror, or conversely, as Oedipa *not* in the mirror. Either way, it is suggestive of the disquietude instilled in her concerning 'embroidering' or 'projecting a world' upon her first encounter with the Varo painting.

How does this 'active' projection of a world fit back onto the individual's conscious search for Others? *The Matrix* is explicit here from step one: Neo (who has constructed a mirror world for himself; or rather, Thomas Anderson has constructed a mirror world for himself, living out fantasies of an alter-identity in the electronic and 'anonymous' medium of the internet) is searching for Others (Morpheus, or the Matrix itself), searching for some hidden agency that will arrange his existence meaningfully, and the narrative continually frames this as a desire for certain occult knowledge - Other knowledge. In such cases (fictional and otherwise), it might be helpful to think of the symbolic in these narratives less as the language (the speech/utterance) of the Other, and rather as the syntax (Greek, 'total arrangement') the subject ascribes to the Other. That is to say, the subject imagines a presence, a signifying regime on a totalizing scale (like the Matrix or like conspiracy), and this presence should be that of a big Other, though it is a construct (whether accurate or not) of the subject through which he himself can ascribe meaning (even if only potential meaning – meaningful gaps) to all points of syntax, to all events, to all signs, at all signposts. Or as Žižek puts it, "where the individual is in search of the big Other's desire (believes that there is a big Other) that it may identify with, it can only come up against the desire of the *other*, and thus enact the hysteric's desire."[178] In this regard, such a location would not be a true language, like a desire, but the speech of the ego; imaginary, not symbolic. Thus, what we often witness is a mirror (from/on the mirror plane) erected onto (masking) the wall of language:

[177] We don't in fact know that it is the very same painting, but if it isn't, it is at least suggestive of it: "a reproduction of a Remedios Varo."
[178] *Looking Awry*, pp. 122.

individual	mirror	wall of language	Other

Again, *The Matrix* repeatedly flirts with this possibility in its suggestion of the One as a complex fantasy of aggrandizement Thomas Anderson engages, being all the while 'plugged in to the Matrix', or, more abstractly, that this is a tale of imaginary realms and a refusal to take up symbolic mandates (as is the case in *Fight Club*); a suggestion that will only be resolved in the final installment. It might be prudent here to once again recognize that there is always an amount of the imaginary present in the symbolic.[179] We should think of this in terms of the letter always reaching its destination. In the letter, the subject 'happens to' find himself, and so it is in the realm of the wall of language that the subject 'happens to' continually encounter others (and therewith himself). The distinction we want to make here is not whether the subject finds his own reflection in the realm of the wall of language, but a structural distinction: is the subject on the other side of a wall of language that is, in turn, determined by the Other, or is the individual projecting a mirror onto the wall of language? In the later case, there is clearly too strong an adherence to the imaginary. In this regard, we see how the subject or protagonist within conspiracy narratives is generally regarded as mad (often regardless of whether he is right or not). As Lacan states, "A madman is precisely someone who adheres to the imaginary, purely and simply."[180] And as suggested by Žižek, "being treated as a madman, being excluded from the social big Other, effectively EQUALS being mad. 'Madness' is not the designation which can be grounded in a direct reference to 'facts'…but only with regard to the way an individual relates to the 'big Other'."[181] It is in the light of this condition that we can understand how the subject of conspiracy is always mad, *regardless* of whether he is

[179] "What interfaces with the wall of language is the specular relation, whereby by what pertains to the ego is always perceived, appropriated, via the intermediary of an other, who for the subject always retains the properties of the *Urbild*, of the fundamental image of the ego" (Lacan, *Book II*, pp. 248).
[180] *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Pp. 243.
[181] Slavoj Žižek: "The Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion."

right or wrong. From this perspective, a recognition of really existing conditions can also effectively equal too strong an adherence to the imaginary.

The Ego, Narcissism, and the Specular Image

We don't want [O]ther worlds, we want mirrors.
- Dr. Gibarian, *Solaris*

Or to put this a slightly different way, 'we don't want *Other* worlds, we want *other* worlds'; which is as much as to say, we don't want (our libidos) to be regulated by the big Other (and the object of desire determined according to it), but by the ego as it is bound up in imaginary tensions. According to Lacan, "[t]he ego is inscribed in the imaginary. Everything pertaining to the ego is inscribed in imaginary tensions, like all other libidinal tensions. Libido and the ego are on the same side." And furthermore that "[n]arcissism is libidinal."[182] In what follows, we will consider these conditions, keeping in mind the way in which they are opposed to the order of the symbolic: "The symbolic order is rejected by the libidinal order, which includes the whole of the domain of the imaginary, including the structure of the ego.**"**[183] We might also say in this regard that the reality principle is replaced by the pleasure principle. As we will see, what is at stake in the following narrative analysis is the question of what is forfeited and/or gained with a strong adherence to the imaginary, or imaginary 'objects', and the forfeiture of the real object, though we will want to make a distinction between two types here (the ego-ideal and the object-ideal; both within the order of the imaginary). Taking the idea of the ideal as our springboard, we can plot the trajectory of a highly developed ego-ideal, according to David Fincher's *Fight Club*, and the trajectory of a highly developed object-ideal, according to Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, based on the book by Stanislaw Lem. In so doing, we should first turn to what Freud has to say on the topic of idealization.

"Idealization is possible in the sphere of ego-libido as well as in that of object-libido. For example, the sexual overvaluation of an object is an idealization of it. In so far as

[182] *Book II*, pp. 326.
[183] Ibid.

sublimation describes something that has to do with the instinct and idealization something to do with the object, the two concepts are to be distinguished from each other."[184] With Lacan, we might align sublimation with the symbolic (Other desire) and idealization with the imaginary. Before turning our attention to a comparison of ego-libido and object-libido, I should stress the fact that the distinction Freud makes here is not between these two 'things', but between idealization and sublimation. For our discussion, we will first (and foremost) be interested in the ego and the object in relation to idealization. In this regard, we must recognize that, despite any distinction between the two, the overvaluated object also relates back to the ego insofar as idealization falls within the sphere of the imaginary and always has a direct correlation to Me (conversely, we could say that the ego-ideal is also an object insofar as I am not It, or it is not Me, but rather an ideal).

In Tarkovsky's *Solyaris*, the Russian government is engaged in an extra-terrestrial project at the surface of a distant planet. From a space station situated not far from the Solarian ocean, testing is performed in an effort to communicate with the ocean, which, we are informed, "is like a giant brain capable of thought." Due to a lack of satisfactory results despite years of research, the project is in danger of being cancelled. Accordingly, and in response to strange hallucinatory phenomena taking place in the docking station, psychologist Kris Kelvin (Donatas Banionis) is sent to the space station near Solaris for a final evaluation. Upon his arrival, he finds the station in utter disarray, and its inhabitants appear to be somewhat deranged and obscure in their behavior. He is also immediately informed that his colleague Dr. Gibaryan (Sos Sargsyan) has taken his life. Kelvin then goes to the living quarters of Gibaryan and finds Gibaryan has left a video for him. In it, he tries to express the difficulty of understanding what is taking place, but implores Kelvin to believe that it has nothing to do with madness, and, should he also encounter the same type of experience, he should not think himself mad. Kelvin watches the beginning of the video in Gibaryan's room, and shortly after, the rest of it in his own. Up until now, the film has primarily been shot in color, with the exception of when we are watching television/video footage, as well as a couple of other short sequences. As soon

[184] *Freud Reader*, pp. 558.

as Kelvin enters his room, the film switches to black and white. Kelvin arranges some things, puts in the video, sits on the bed, and watches the remainder of it. He then lies back on the bed, but before shutting his eyes, he rises again and looks at himself in a mirror, takes a pistol, then returns to his bed, where he dozes off. At this moment, the film shifts back to color, and we see what at first appears to be a dream sequence. He sees his wife Khari (Natalya Bondarchuk), who is dead, before him, alive. This is something of a reversal of common practice concerning the use of black and white in a color film. Often, in dream, fantasy or flashback sequences, the scene will be shot in black and white to distinguish that this is not an actual event we are witnessing, but an 'imaginary' one. By shooting Kelvin's potential hallucination in color, there is the suggestion of authenticity, or the suggestion of an inversion (and by all means a subversion) of what is 'real' and what is 'fantasy'. This sets the tone for the rest of the film.

As we come to find out, there is a distinct 'realness' to this 'embodiment' of Khari, Kelvin's wife, though it quickly becomes clear that she is not the 'real thing'. As Dr. Snauth (Jüri Järvet) explains to Kelvin, "[w]hat you saw was a materialization of your idea of her." If this is the case, we can as well say that it is a materialization of his *idealization* of his wife. As the film progresses, it becomes evident that Kelvin is unwilling to give up this bodied phantasm that bears an extraordinary resemblance to his wife. The question put forth in *Solyaris* is not whether Kelvin's 'visitor' wife is 'really real', but whether it really makes a difference if she is real or not. That is, does an actual external object independent of our wills and desires necessarily have any more potency than an imaginary projection, a phantasm reflecting our ideals (of objects of desire, of egos…)?

As Freud suggests in his work on narcissism, "[t]he highest phase of development of which object-libido is capable is seen in the state of being in love, when the subject seems to give up his own personality in favor of an object-cathexis" (547). What happens then, as in *Solyaris*, when the cathected object disappears from the outer world, and only exists in the memory of the subject? As Freud explains in regard to patients suffering from hysteria or obsessional neurosis, they "substitute real objects for imaginary ones from his memory" (Freud, 546).[185] With *Solyaris*, we might propose that the cathected

[185] Ibid, pp. 546.

object is 'reverted' at the loss of his wife and subsequently idealized. We can see this in Kelvin's regret for wrongs he has done her (reenacted with the jettisoning of the first 'visitor' incarnation) exemplified by his defense of her, and occasioned by prostrate humility and his unwillingness to leave her a second time. Thus, Kelvin's cathected object becomes an object-ideal that is re-projected and is basically indistinguishable from (the memory of) the 'original' object. Such a process of idealization is not unlike libidinal investment in an ego-ideal to such an extreme that it emerges in the 'outer world' and 'observes' or otherwise engages the ego, for which we also find a fine example in Fincher's *Fight Club*.

According to Freud, narcissistic object-choice can be an ideal self as well as the self:

> The difference between the two, which contains the conditioning factor of repression, can easily be expressed in terms which enable it to be explained by the libido theory. We can say that the one man has set up an *ideal* in himself by which he measures his actual ego, while the other has formed no such ideal. For the ego the formation of an ideal would be the conditioning factor of repression. This ideal ego is now the target of the self love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego… What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal.[186]

Fight Club is rather exact in this regard. As Tyler points out when the narrator first consciously realizes that Tyler is his double, his (hysterical) projection into the external: "You were looking for a way to change your life. You could not do this on your own. All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I look like you wanna look. I fuck like you wanna fuck. I am smart, capable, and, most importantly, I am free in all the ways you are not." Indeed, in the sequences that follow, we see the narrator fighting himself, drinking with himself, observing himself, having sex with Marla (Helena Bonham Carter), and so forth. He is taking pleasure, enjoying, not through his ego, but through his ego-ideal, the "substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood."

What we should not overlook here is Freud's statement concerning repression in the above quote: the formation of an ego-ideal means repression for the ego. Why is this so? Freud draws a direct correlation between the ego, conscience, and paranoid dis-ease. The

[186] Ibid, pp. 557-8.

conscience functions in the service of narcissistic satisfaction by constantly checking the 'actual' ego against the ego-ideal. In this regard, someone - the ego-ideal - is always watching, listening, conspiring; and thus the ego is still less 'free' to act as it 'wishes'. On the other hand, this ego-ideal as embodied by Tyler contains characteristics that appear to be more primal, more destructive, more proper to our idea of the 'id' or the unconscious than anything else; in short, it enjoys *too much*. Though we nonetheless should inquire as to what it serves. It clearly does not serve itself; Tyler's 'enjoyment' is not a means to an end in and of itself. I would hazard that it also does more than simply allow the ego the narcissistic satisfaction it can no longer produce 'on its own'. This highly enjoying ego-ideal functions in the service of the ego, ultimately allowing the narrator access to a healthy, 'stable' ego, with or through which he can resume normal symbolic relations. How does it do this? By requiring its own (the ego-ideal) repression. Thus, despite initial indications that the appearance of an ego-ideal means more enjoyment, Tyler's appearance ultimately results in repression for the ego (ideal). What else does the spliced in frame of the penis at the end of the film indicate if not this? The enjoying and destructive phallus has not been extinguished, but repressed (and is thus liable to reemerge). But if the purpose, in this narrative, of the ego-ideal is to serve the ego, to restore it to a healthy state, so to speak, then we must assume a 'something wrong' to begin with. According to Freud, "the sick man withdraws his libidinal cathexes back upon his own ego, and sends them out again when he recovers." This applies equally for "anxiety neurosis with its superstructure of hysteria" (551). Here, we have simply to return to the first quarter of the film, where we see the suffering of the narrator, convinced he is dying from insomnia, miserably depressed by his job and the general conditions of his life. When the doctor informs him he can't die from insomnia, he appropriates a host of diseases (and identities) and, in the manner of the hysteric, enacts them in the company of others, seeking solace and affirmation: testicular cancer, tuberculosis, melanoma, lymphoma, blood parasites, brain parasites, organic brain dementia, bowel cancer. He is also distinctly alone, and laments this ("when people think you're dying they really really listen to you"). The narrator is by all means 'sick', even if it is not a 'biological' sickness, but rather a psychological one (so much the better!). What we witness in *Fight Club* is the trajectory of his potential recovery.

> [A] man who has exchanged his narcissism for homage to a high ego ideal has not necessarily on that account succeeded in sublimating his libidinal instincts… It is precisely in neurotics that we find the highest differences of potential between the development of their ego ideal and the amount of sublimation of their primitive libidinal instincts… Further, the formation of an ego ideal and sublimation are quite differently related to the causation of neurosis. As we have learnt, the formation of an ideal heightens the demands of the ego and is the most powerful factor favoring repression; sublimation is a way out, a way by which those demands can be met *without* involving repression.[187]

Toward the film's end, the narrator is increasingly interested in the well being of Marla, his love interest, and increasingly skeptical of his 'out of control' ego-ideal. One of the ways in which we might read this skepticism in relation to any subsequent sublimation is that, while the narrator can extract narcissistic pleasure through the presence and 'actions' of the ego-ideal, it eventually instructs him as to what he may not be and do. This is perhaps not a typical ego-ideal that sets the example of how to act, thereby tightening the constraints on the ego, but rather an ego-ideal that indulges in destructive pleasure, both bringing agency to the ego, but also redefining its boarders of control. Indeed, the demands on the narrator's ego have clearly been heightened from what we originally witness: in the first third of the film he (his ego) is a zombie ego, disengagedly adhering to socio-cultural norms in a profoundly meaningless manner. The next question the film exposes is what to do with this cathected ego-ideal once it has 'served its purpose'; what to do with this libidinal investiture that by no means simply evaporates, but has 'been exposed' and met an impasse?

> We have recognized our mental apparatus as being first and foremost a device designed for mastering excitations which would otherwise be felt as distressing or would have pathogenic effects… it is a matter of indifference whether this internal process of working over is carried out upon real or imaginary objects. The difference does not appear until later - if the turning of the libido on to unreal objects (introversion) has lead to its being dammed up. In paraphrenics, megalomania allows of a similar internal working-over of libido which has returned to the ego; perhaps it is only when the megalomania fails that the damming-up of libido in the ego becomes pathogenic and starts the process of recovery which gives us the impression of being a disease.[188]

[187] *The Freud Reader*, pp. 558.
[188] Pp. 553.

Following Freud's logic and rhetoric here, we would say that the libidinal investiture in the ego (in the form of an ideal) has been 'dammed up'. Interestingly, as soon as the narrator understands the location in which this reserve of libido has been invested, he begins a conscious attempt to redirect his energies toward Marla while extracting them from the ego-ideal (though strictly speaking this would be based on an unconscious impulse). That is, it appears that the process of sublimation of his libidinal instincts ensues. *Fight Club* (which also has a very optimistic ending) is perhaps somewhat unusual here in that it allows for this 'way out' at the narrative's end.[189] It is with little exception that the narratives framing a crisis in the status of the symbolic and the big Other end with adherence to the imaginary, be it in the form of menacing paranoia or excessive utopia.

'other' Places: Paranoia and Schizophrenia

> *We are all sufferers from history, but the paranoid is a double sufferer, since he is afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well.*
> - Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics"

> *If…fear and panic are the most evident somatic responses to the fragmentations and decenterings of the so-called postmodern condition, then paranoia can be viewed as the reaction-formation par excellence to the schizophrenias of postmodern identity, economy, and aesthetics.*
> - Patrick O'Donnell, *Latent Destinies*.

We might say in regard to the difference between paranoia and schizophrenia that they are 'working from opposite ends'. Where (a cultural, as opposed to medical, understanding of) schizophrenia entails integration of external components (as we've seen illustrated by characters like Mucho Mass or Pierce Inverarity in *Lot 49*) as well as originary fracture or splitting (*schizophrenia*, Gr.: split mind) and the consequent symptoms, paranoia functions from the position of a fear of this very condition - a fear of

[189] *Matrix Revolutions*, as I have noted, does as well. We might say that at the end of each film, something has been resolved in the sense of being settled for the time being, but not solved in the sense of mastered: *Fight Club* ends with the suggestion of a possible reemergence of destructive *jouissance* and *Revolutions* with the recognition that what has been resolved is only the immediate threat of war, and not the complicated dynamics this power relation between the humans and the machines (subject - Other).

'splitting', and of the innermost 'me' being exposed to the influence of external factors.[190] O'Donnell's paraphrasing of Deleuze and Guattari is instructive here: "Deleuze and Guattari oppose 'schizophrenia' - the capacity to contain partial, peripheral, multiple, and contradictory 'points of departure' working on many plateaus within one assemblage (the 'mindset' of the postmodern subject) - to 'paranoia,' or the delimiting tendency of the modern subject to think in terms of centers, wholes, solid states, totalities, harmonies" (pp. 28).

With paranoia, we might propose a fear in relation to alienation on two levels. On the one hand, there is an anxiety in response to the loss for the integral humanist subject with a protected inner core. In this regard, what is feared is any compromise to this inner core - which is the very kernel and primary constituent at the center of my being - or the possibility that it does not spring forth directly from me (that it is not 'innate'), but rather has a direct, originary, relation to the external (an 'extimate kernel'; the 'self' as always decentred). On the other hand, there is fear that is a result of what we have already discussed concerning the formation of an ego-ideal. In this case, another split (a secondary split - a split in the already split ego) creates an element through which the subject (or the ego) is always being observed (by the ego-ideal). Thus, paranoid anxiety can hinge on anxiety concerning an originary splits in regard to the ego (I am constituted in the external), or a secondary one relating back to the formation of an ego-ideal, or both.

Because of the trademark characteristics of paranoia and schizophrenia, we often align them with what we recognize as modern and postmodern ideologies, respectively. Or to put it another way, paranoia, with its belief in the integral humanist subject at the base of its trajectory, is characterized by the modern, while schizophrenia, with its 'splitting' and originary integration of the external at the base of its trajectory, is characterized by the postmodern. Timothy Melley, in his discussion of "agency panic" and technologies that force cultural shifts in post-war America, suggests one possible location for the base of paranoia's cultural trajectory. His assertion is that certain

[190] In strict medical terms, schizophrenia has to do, primarily, with a split between emotion and cognition; whereas from a cultural standpoint we often associate elements of multiple personality disorder with schizophrenia. My use of schizophrenia here is draws on its common use in cultural theory, in which psychic agency is 'worked on' from various external channels 'internalized' that are often in conflict with one another.

technologies and displacements of power, or social control, have specific implications for the cultural conception of subjectivity: precisely that such conditions *do* "affect individual identity." What agency panic, which we should think of in conjunction with paranoia (both a response to the same 'threats') exposes, he argues, is "a broad cultural refusal to modify a concept of self that is no longer wholly accurate or useful, but that still underpins a long-standing national fantasy of subjectivity:

> This concept of self stands in sharp contrast to poststructural and postmodern theoretical reconceptions of subjectivity, which have exploded the assumptions of liberal individualism, arguing that identity is constructed from without, repeatedly reshaped through performance, and (in extreme accounts) best understood as a schizophrenic and anchorless array of separate components… In the wake of such theories, many cultural critics have emphasized the relation between postmodern narrative and these newly 'fragmented' or 'decentered' concepts of subjectivity – frequently associating modernism with paranoia and postmodernism with schizophrenia.[191]

We should keep in mind that such a comparison between paranoia and schizophrenia is drawn over a theoretical frame of reference, and not necessarily a historical one, particularly as we will be discussing the two of them as found in or applied to what are recognized as patently postmodern narratives. In the following discussion, we will consider how they are manifest and where they potentially converge in conspiracy, though before doing so, we should have a brief look at the historical trajectory of conspiracy as a cultural component.

Transformation in the location of conspiracy

Following Melley's trajectory for agency panic and conspiracy, we might sketch a line from early Cold War period notions of conspiracy, where there is perhaps a more vague distinction between paranoia and anxiety (dis-ease without an object), to the late-capitalist notion of conspiracy where there is an integral notion of paranoia as fear of the ever-present Other (which, properly speaking, can never be an object per se, but is

[191] Pp. 14-15.

nonetheless represented by cultural representatives of Others desire - Government, for example), and a fear which, as we have said, is to be enjoyed.

In the pre and early Cold War era, the concepts of paranoia and conspiracy float at the cultural periphery, comprising a fringe narrative, and functioning like an epoxy to that which it threatens by providing a basis for difference and otherness. In so doing it fortifies that which is 'me' or 'us' against that which is 'not me' or 'them'. During the Cold War, the fear of communism spans from A. Mitchell Palmer's 'Red Scare' (circa 1920), over the 'McCarthy era' (circa 1950), and on to Reagan's impassioned anti-communist policy. In the earlier portion of this period, particularly 1920 to 1950, conspiracy moves from something threatening at the fringes to a more central position, with the idea that we have been quietly infiltrated and the enemy is 'among us'. One might say that the development of the 'enemy among us' mentality reaches its apex and turning point with the Kennedy assassination (1963) and its surrounding conspiracy theories, and the Nixon Watergate scandal (1972). With these incidents, there was a widespread feeling that the enemy 'among us' is not only one who has successfully infiltrated and integrated itself, but rather the enemy is *one of us*; and thus, not 'among us', but in fact 'us ourselves'. In the post Cold War era, conspiracy becomes a core cultural narrative (centralized as opposed to peripheral) that is no longer accompanied by the surprise, disconcertion and hysteria it had generally been characterized by, but has rather come to be expected.

As we will be discussing the American Dream in the next section, it would be instructive to think of the cultural trajectory of conspiracy along with a reflexive conception of the State (as big Other) as it embodies and/or propagates the cultural mythology of the American Dream. The basic ideology of this mythology is dependant on a primarily 'humanist' constituent insofar as it places at its center the concept of the generative force of the autonomous individual. In considering the development of conspiracy alongside the American Dream, we want to map a development in the idea of the American Dream, which, the further it develops, will mirror the certain constituents in paranoia and conspiracy, and should ultimately contribute to our understanding in a contemporary crisis in subjectivity.

I would start out with the basic, if simplified, assumption that the core 'text' of the early American Dream was one which espoused that America is a place where one can 'be oneself', and succeed, or not have to live in fear of oppression. That is, it allowed for individuals to shed certain stereotypes and negative associations/experiences which 'stuck to' *who they were*. In this sense it allowed individuals to 'start over', transferring their 'selves' into a new context (the various Dutch or English settlers who basically relocated their culture without entirely cutting themselves off from their cultural history), while at the same time upholding the myth of the autonomous humanist individual who has a core self that can be transplanted from one topological and cultural topography to another.

We witness a rewriting of the American Dream in war-time and post-war America, which had less to do with recontextualizing one's 'self' and more to do with divorcing one's history (and 'self'), leaving it with an abandon geographical topology (the waves of Latin Americans and central and eastern Europeans who moved to America, changed their names, stopped speaking their native tongue, and tried as far as possible to cut all ties with their cultural background in order to be 'American'). Here is where the element of 'reinventing' oneself in accord with the American Dream begins to dramatically stand out: the point was not to carry your cultural history and core beliefs into a new context, but to 'wipe' your identity clear and assume a new one, American. As we will discuss further on, in 'postmodern' or contemporary America, the core text of the American Dream has taken this idea of reinvention to its extreme form, in which, as Melley suggests, one's identity hinges on the act of continual reinvention, or performance, where one may 'choose' one's defining narratives *at will* and continually rewrite themselves with little responsibility to the social symbolic (the amassment of new age secular cults, literally tens of thousands of them, whose doctrines consist of a patchwork of various religious and philosophical ideologies are a good example). As Christopher Palmer suggests in *Philip K. Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern*, "…it is often alleged that postmodernity does something quite drastic and unprecedented to history: it erases it" (pp. 4). It is in this capacity that we should think of the American Dream's injunction to reinvent oneself and thus think of the narrative of the American Dream as patently postmodern.

With the movement from the modern to the postmodern, and the humanistic to the post-human, we witness the development of a certain panic or crisis at the location of the individual that I have repeatedly pointed to: beginning with a fear of an outside threat to the essential and innate core at the individual's center, and moving on to the fear that identity is no way authentic, but rather an artificial construct (many of these postmodern narratives both celebrate postmodernity and expose anxieties about the implications of the postmodern and the posthuman for the individual).[192] Thus the line of trajectory we might draw from the intact, integral liberal humanist subject with a protected inner core, to the modern subject whose autonomy and agency are threatened from the outside, on to the postmodern subject whose boundaries are fluid, who functions schizophrenically, integrating the external, and arriving at the posthuman subject who is fully constructed by external agents, composed and programmed, cybernetic, but who none-the-less *thinks*, and therefore *is* (this, as we see throughout these narratives, becomes more and more the slogan of posthuman, cyborgian self reification), finds a correlate in the trajectory of the American Dream.

It is at the posthuman subject where what is at stake in our assessment of this trajectory is played through. In the several sci-fi narratives, the posthuman takes its literal, physical form (*Terminator II*'s "ideal father" who is purely a machine, *Blade Runner*'s replicants…), and even in narratives such as Auster's *New York Trilogy* or Palahniuk's *Survivor*, we see parallels to the posthuman in that these characters are beyond integrating the external; they are entirely composed of/by the external. There is not necessarily a division here from the postmodern; several depictions – Allen's Zelig, Heller's Bob Slocum, Pynchon's Mucho Mass – are generally thought of as typically (or definitively) postmodern. Equally, characters such as Lee Oswald in both Stone's *JFK* and DeLillo's *Libra* are read as typically postmodern in that they are real individuals who have become fictionalized subjects; again, entirely constructed from/by the external. With

[192] What we recognize as *posthuman* is in many ways an extension of the implications of postmodernism at the location of 'the body' and the subject: Where postmodernism is based in concepts of fracture, pastiche, 'native' instability, and dissemination, posthuman(ism) applies them to bodies as they become increasingly cyborgian and recognizes the nature of subjectivity and identity as inextricably dependant on a collection of external factors (finally making the claim that due to the extimate nature of subjectivity and identity, we are all ultimately cyborgian). In this regard, posthuman ideology is thoroughly, if implicitly, Lacanian: "the subject's 'decentrement' is original and constitutive; 'I' am from the very outset 'outside myself', a *bricolage* of external components" (Zupančič paraphrasing Lacan, pp. viii).

this 'postmodern condition', the subjects' paranoid fear in the several narratives we have discussed is substantiated. If we accept the tenets of postmodernity, then what is exposed through these narratives is not so much a threat toward the idea of this substantiating inner core as, more radically, an exposure of its absence: *I am being compromised from without* becomes *I am being constituted from without*. It is a mere step from compromise (modern, paranoid angst) to comprised (postmodern, schizophrenic condition). When conspiracy exposes this fear of threatening compromise, it is telling us, in effect, about something (always) already lost (and in this regard is, as Melley suggests, nostalgic). As social subjects, the individual can't but help mourn a certain loss of autonomy or agency. As thoroughly illustrated by Freud and Levi-Strauss, the social subject has had to give something of himself and his desire up. There are constant sacrifices, 'trade-offs' and controls at play. Where postmodern/posthuman narratives call up 'modern' paranoid anxieties, they are drawing from the same well of nostalgia for the always already lost.[193] Here is where a framing of imaginary adherence functions as a basis: What narratives displaying adherence to the imaginary expose is a rejection symptomatic of this 'loss', a loss which we recognize as constitutive of bringing the individual into a proper social context (symbolic relations). Therefore, with the rejection of my duties to the social context (to give myself up to the Other's desire), I end up stuck to the specular location of imaginary 'engagement'.

Paranoia, Schizophrenia, and the Imaginary

> *This Hegelian formulation [of a plant as an animal with its intestines outside its body: its roots] holds also – and especially – for the symbolic order, a kind of spiritual intestines of the human animal outside its Self: the spiritual Substance of my being, the roots from which I draw my spiritual food, are outside myself, embodied in the decentred symbolic order. One is thus tempted to say that, spiritually, man remains an animal, rooted in an external substance – one of the impossible New Age dreams is precisely to turn man into a spiritual animal, floating freely in spiritual space, without any need for substantial roots outside himself.*[194]

[193] "The importance of agency panic… lies in its troubled defense of an old but increasingly beleaguered concept of personhood – the idea that the individual is a rational, motivated agent with a protected interior core of beliefs, desires, and memories" (Melley, pp.viii). This is precisely what is at stake in *Blade Runner*, *Total Recall*, *Time Out of Joint*, *Matrix*, *Truman Show*, *eXistenZ*, and so forth.

[194] Zupančič, pp. viii-ix.

In the comment on New Age dreams, we can recognize the schizophrenic element in this kind of behavior and its connection to the American Dream as I have suggested above; that is, in acting on the idea that one can 'float free' of one's roots, or to put it another way - simply choose to be what one wants to be (choose one's defining narratives) independently of one's socio-symbolic responsibilities and ties (one's symbolic debt). There is also a divide here in the postmodern subject that we should be aware of. On the one hand, we claim, "we are postmodern; we are schizophrenic," and in so claiming, we 'understand' or at least recognize our status as beings in a social context, and, further, we understand the implications of this status and that my 'me-ness' necessarily has a context: I am determined/defined by my interaction with the world around me (the question of whether I engage this location more actively or more passively is an entirely different point); or, I am a subject only insofar as I am a subject within symbolic relations. On the other hand, we also have what is again a more imaginary adherence to the postmodern condition of schizophrenia, in which one says, "being comprised in the external, I am free to choose the external agencies, the external elements, the narratives that comprise me *according to my own will*" (as opposed to being free to do so according to the will of the Other). Like the search for the big Other we have discussed, this is equally a misguided understanding (of 'freedom' in this case). This is not the kind of choice involved in the formation of the subject; this is not where the subject is 'free to choose'. This is, rather, an impossible dream, and in so being, adheres to fantasy and the imaginary.[195] Thus, although there are important definitive distinctions between paranoia and schizophrenia, we might say that they have the potential to serve in the failure of subjectivity in a similar manner.

Pynchon brings this element to the fore in a passage from *Lot 49*. After much investigation, Oedipa is quite convinced that there is a widespread conspiracy related to a secret means of communication (the secret postal service), though she wishes at this point that what she has witnessed would be only a psychotic delusion: "She had decided…to go see Dr. Hilarius her shrink, and tell him all. She might well be in the cold and sweatless

[195] As I will argue, this is where the American Dream can so easily tip over into an ideological component that encourages adherence to imaginary fantasy.

meat-hooks of a psychosis… Yet she wanted it all to be fantasy - some clear result of her several wounds, needs, dark doubles" (91). When she arrives at Hilarius' clinic, she finds that he has (also) gone mad, has holed himself up in his office with a gun and has been firing at people. When the police arrive and break into Hilarius' clinic, he flings open the office door and takes Oedipa as a hostage. Despite having spoken with her for some time through the door, he now first recognizes who she is: "Oh…it's you," he says, and Oedipa replies, "well who did you think you'd been-" and Hilarius continues,

> Discussing my case with? Another. There is me, there are the others. You know, with the LSD, we're finding, the distinction begins to vanish. Egos lose their sharp edges. But I never took the drug, I chose to remain in relative paranoia, where at least I know who I am and who the others are.[196]

We might view Dr. Hilarious as a madman according to Lacan's definition: he (is paranoid and) adheres to the imaginary. Although, according to himself, he knows that there is himself and there are others (he has also clearly read his Lacan), his projection onto the others takes on a purer form now, imagining he is under attack from terrorists, fanatics, Israeli agents. We might say that the distinction between self and other has not vanished, but that *the one* has thoroughly contaminated *the other*. We can see how this is not so different from his LSD patients, where the 'distinction' between self and other "begins to vanish." While Oedipa is away, Mucho begins to take the LSD prescribed by Hilarius, and his ego 'loses its sharp edges'; he turns schizophrenic, assimilating those he comes into contact with. Funch, Mucho's boss, explains to Oedipa that, "'He's losing his identity, Edna, how else can I put it? Day by day, Wendell is less himself and more generic. He enters a staff meeting and the room is suddenly full of people, you know? He's a walking assembly of man'" (97). And later, when confronting Mucho on this, Oedipa says, "Is this what Funch means when he says you're coming on like a whole roomful of people?' 'That's what I am,' said Mucho, 'right. Everybody is'" (99).[197] We

[196] Pp. 94

[197] Pp. 99. Earlier in the narrative there is an equally explicit playing through of schizophrenic characteristics when Oedipa recalls a telephone call from Inverarity, the last one was to ever receive, about a year prior to the beginning of the narrative: "last year at three or so one morning there had come this long-distance call, from where she would never know (unless now he'd left a diary) by a voice beginning in heavy Slavic tones as second secretary at the Transylvania Consulate, looking for an escaped bat; modulated to comic-Negro, then on into hostile Pachuco dialect, full of chingas and maricones; then a

might say that there is an inversion here: where Hilarius' view of others is contaminated by his wild imaginings (paranoid), Mucho's view of himself is contaminated by others (schizophrenic). In the end, the distinction is not great: others always function as a type of filter for the self, and where Hilarius has 'chosen' and projected very distinct and unlikely identities for these 'filters', Mucho has 'chosen' more generic ones he integrates. In both cases, identification with the other is too strong. In the case of Hilarius, where he believes he can make a distinction, he has simply infused others with a highly restricted element of himself, so that they become some impossible embodiment of his fears. Mucho, on the other hand, is writing a perhaps less restricted element of himself - 'myself the social being in its various potential manifestations' - onto others and identifying accordingly, which entails integration, whereas Hilarius' 'identification' with his others requires rejection, as they reflect his fears. In this, we find the similarity between paranoia and schizophrenia as noted above. Here, they both function in the service of the imaginary, though the vehicle *identification* carries a different passenger, so to speak, for each: fear (paranoia) and the various manifestations of the *social I* (schizophrenia).

This double invocation, or coupling, of paranoia and schizophrenia is not an isolated incident in Pynchon's story, but rather a *modus operandi* for talking about adherence to the imaginary throughout the text. Though the reader realizes from the outset that this is a tale of paranoia and conspiracy, the narrative is spotted with various schizophrenic characters and scenes (depictions). Often, we witness characters that are schizophrenic or 'postmodern' in that their boundaries and identities are fluid and modulate. For example, the rock group the Paranoids have assumed new identities, with new names (Miles, Dean, Serge, Leonard), new accents, hairstyles, and so forth, modeling themselves after British rock icons. Additionally, there is Metzger/Baby Igor as well as Manny DiPresso, a colleague who buys cars when 'temporarily insane', and both of whom vacillate between being lawyers and being actors (this is, though, also clearly an ironic jab at the element of *Inszenierung* - staging - implicit in certain aspects of legal work). There the Yoyodyne employees at The Scope (a bar) who, on the one hand, lead a professional life working at

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Gestapo officer asking her in shrieks did she have any relatives in Germany and finally his Lamont Cranston voice, the one he'd talked in all the way to Mazatlan. […]it was the last of his voices she ever heard. Lamont Cranston" (6).

a large corporation (they are conformists) and, on the other hand, are subversive (anti-conformist) and have alter-identities that use a secret postal system to communicate. There are the Inamourati, all of whom at one point attempted suicide due to failed romantic relations and after also failing at taking their own lives alter their perspective and way of social interaction so as to never become romantically interested or involved - they assume new personalities. And there is our 'heroine' Oedipa, with her various identities or 'egos': "'Oh, call me Edna…'" (97).

First, there is Oedipa the suburban housewife who has a psychiatrist, goes to Tupperware parties, tends her herb garden, cooks lasagna dinners and drinks whiskey sours while she waits for her husband to come home from work. And there is the recklessly romantic alter-Oedipa, who seeks sexual adventure:

> "when she got a look at the next motel, she hesitates a moment. A representation in painted sheet metal of a nymph holding a white blossom towered thirty feet into the air; the sign, lit up despite the sun, said 'Echo Courts'. The face of the Nymph was much like Oedipa's, which didn't startle her so much as a concealed blower system that kept the nymph's gauze chiton in constant agitation, revealing enormous vermilion-tipped breasts and long pink thighs at each flap. She was smiling a lipsticked and public smile, not quite a hooker's but nowhere near that of any nymph pining away with love either. Oedipa pulled into the lot" (16).

Oedipa identifies with this immediately and, seeing her own face in the face of the sexily/scantly clad nymph intimating sexual adventure, and decides to stay there. Later, in a bathroom stall, when she sees a drawing of the muted postal horn and an address with the message "get in touch with Kirby," she thinks, "It might be something sexual" (34) and proceeds to copy the address and symbol into her memo book. The next time she sees the symbol, the first thing she says to the person possessing it is, "Kirby sent me." While at lake Inverarity, we are told that she sees an "Art Nouveau reconstruction of some European pleasure casino. Oedipa fell in love with it" (37). And toward the end, the rather sarcastically suggestive bit of text, "'Your fly is open,' whispered Oedipa. She was not sure what she'd do when the bidder revealed himself" (126). And finally, there is Oedipa the curious and paranoid detective, the Oedipa we get to know best, who constantly needs to pursue a mystery, is insatiably inquisitive, if imprecise, in her

inquiries, and who has no quips about assuming an identity when she sees fit: she is Arnold Snarb, for instance, to the man she meets from Inamorati Anonymous.

Though paranoia, *the* core psychological concept for conspiracy, is generally characterized as 'modern', conspiracy's move into a central cultural narrative has taken place at a time of, and also through texts like, *Lot 49* and various Dick or William Gibson stories, which typify the postmodern. The point to many of these narratives, particularly evident in cyborgian ones such as *Terminator*, *Robocop*, and *Johnny Mnemonic*, for example, is not only that there is a secret agency wielding enormous power that is unseen, though among us (the Red Scare, McCarthy era), but that we are being manipulated at our very core, on the 'inside', by external agents, to the degree that our 'internal core' is a pastiche of external constituents. It is here that we can see how conspiracy, typified by paranoia, breaches the postmodern (and the schizophrenic), and, if the cultural trajectory of paranoia now finds its location alongside schizophrenia in many respects (and representations), it is due to a nostalgia for something always already lost (my 'protected inner core') that is equally represented, if from a different angle, in the postmodern, and due to a proliferation of postmodern narratives that equally deal with the condition of adhering to the imaginary, thereby expose it as a prevalent symptom in the contemporary economy of culture.

‘other’ Places II: Missing Symbolic Mandates

> *I know not who I am, but I talk in the mirror to the stranger that appears. Our conversations are circles, always one-sided, nothing is clear. Except you keep coming back to this meaning that I lack. He says the choices were given. Now you must live them, or just not live.*[198]

[198] Bright Eyes, “Haligh, Haligh, A Lie, Haligh,” from the May 2000 release, *Fevers & Mirrors*.

This quote, from Conor Oberst of the band Bright Eyes, succinctly paraphrases what is at stake in Lacan's *vel*. It first evokes the mirror image of the other, and suggests the danger in too ardently identifying with it. In such a case, with no distance (with no alienation[199]), engagement or exchange is not 'what it appears to be', but is rather an imaginary projection mirrored for/by the individual. There can be no engagement or exchange if there is no lack (in meaning, in signification). The location that will allow a break in such an imaginary cycle is precisely a location of lack, the Other's desire, the (forced) choice of which (which is always already "given") makes the emergence of the subject possible. Not to choose the "choices [which] were given" equals death for the subject, as we see illustrated with Lacan's *your money or your life*. As Zupančič notes regarding the freedom to choose:

> the fact that Kant founds freedom and the moral law on pure reason, do[es] not imply that freedom is to be based on a 'retreat to the interior' [that is, to the imaginary]… The defining feature of a free act, on the contrary, is precisely that it is entirely foreign to the subject's inclinations… Thus we might say that the 'self' of practical reason does not really 'live at home', and that therefore the foundation of the subject's freedom can reside only in some foreign body: the subject only gains access to freedom in so far as she finds herself a stranger in her own house… For some critics, what is hardest to take in Kant's move is precisely that Kant takes this 'foreign body' as that which *is* 'most truly ours', and founds on it the autonomy and freedom of the subject… If one tries to found freedom on the fact that the causes of a subject's actions are internal…one will find that freedom itself is reduced back to psychological causality.[200]

We find such causality in, for instance, *Fight Club*, where an adherence to the interior, to the imaginary, gives way to a psychotic projection and enactment of the ego-ideal. An *a priori* condition that the narrative sets forth for this 'outbreak' of the imaginary is the individual, in accord with Melley's suggestion, as incapable of affecting meaningful action. In *Fight Club* this is framed in terms of a 'missing' symbolic mandate. This is explicitly framed in the bathroom scene where the dialogue between Tyler and the narrator exposes a fraudulence or emptiness in the socio-symbolic mandates that have been set for them and in the scene in the basement of Lou's Tavern when Tyler states

[199] Strictly speaking, with the advent of the other, a certain alienation, a split in the self, has already taken place. This, though, does not secure a location in symbolic relations for the individual; or, rather, this does not ensure subjectivity.
[200] *Ethics of the Real*, 22-23.

"We're the middle children of history man. No purpose or place." What these fictional depictions reflect is a severing in a generation's relation to their symbolic responsibilities. They expose a prevalent lack of trust in the cultural narratives written (historically established) for them.[201]

The *Matrix* trilogy, in a rather unusual and brave maneuver for contemporary pop-narratives, covers the entire trajectory of what we have discussed in regard to imaginary adherence and symbolic entry, beginning precisely with a search for the Other, which subsequently leads to a 'retreat to the interior' as the misinterpretation of freedom, on to a representation of crisis concerning the engagement of symbolic mandates, and ending, surprisingly, with an entry into the symbolic (a fulfilling of the mandate/s).

As noted earlier, the first installment of the *Matrix* promises *too much* by ending with the claim that the One will expose what we can only read as the big Other in this narrative, and that the One will 'free' the people from the Matrix. Though what the second installment seems to suggest is that this may be yet another fantasy, that in fact there can be no 'utopia' in which all our antagonisms are resolved. We should recall agent Smith's (and the Architect's) statement in which he describes how 'whole crops' of humans plugged into the Matrix were lost when introduced into a program simulating utopia. Though, despite the potential unmasking of a victory against the machines and a fulfillment of the prophecy as a utopic fantasy, Neo's choice to save Trinity as opposed to saving Zion resolves nothing for us in terms of the individual, Neo, choosing his own utopic fantasy over the necessary fulfillment of a symbolic mandate. And where the second installment of *The Matrix* leaves this central concern ambiguously unresolved in the end, the third and final installment picks it up as the core of the narrative: will Neo realize what his symbolic mandate in fact is (what the big Other requires of him), what is at stake, and what he will have to 'sacrifice' in order to fulfill it; and if he does, will he be able to fulfill it?

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[201] One might posit that such a phenomenon is characteristic of the postmodern 'era' and post-structuralism in that we have learned to approach narratives 'skeptically' with the knowledge that they are always already destabilized, and that the author is 'dead'. That is, we have learned that questioning narratives is the first step in making meaning out of them. In this regard, the 'authority of the text' or of the narrative has been usurped: narratives are not immovable monoliths of 'truth', but rather mutable signifying machines full of gaps and splits.

In *Reloaded*, and even more so in *Revolutions*, Neo repeatedly asks at critical moments, "what do you want?" or "why am I here?" In the case of the Architect, he doesn't 'answer the question'. In the cases of the Oracle and Smith (when embodying Bain), they both respond, "I want what you want." Discussing Lacan's postulate that *desire is always the desire of the Other*, Zupančič points out that it is

> important to bear in mind that this phrase does not exclude the ethical maxim: 'do not give up on *your* desire'. In other words, the dimension of the Other does not exclude the authenticity of the subject's desire. How is *this* possible? Only if we admit that the desire of the Other does not present itself in the form of an answer or a commandment ('I want this or that!'), but - as Lacan points out - in the form of a question or an enigma.[202]

Thus, the Architect's evasion of the question and the Oracle's uncanny mirroring of the lack of an answer to the question ("I want what you want") do not in any way obfuscate what the task at hand is for Neo. "The point is not that the desire of the Other exists somewhere else, with the subject knowing what it is and making it the model of his own desire" (*Ethics*, 164). As the Oracle repeatedly point's out to Neo, he has to make up his "own damned mind." That is, he must identify with the Other's desire (unconsciously), assuming that it is simply his own desire. To paraphrase Zupančič, the 'nothing' of the Other's answer is an invitation to guess what the Other's desire is. The trajectory of *The Matrix* trilogy lays out Neo's move from a 'path of passivity' - where he continually searches for the Other's desire - 'if I only knew what I am supposed to do…' - to one in which the subject *responds to and identifies with the lack in the Other*: 'I know now what I am supposed to do'.

The end of *Revolutions* is a sobering one in that we do not celebrate Zion's victory and the fall of the machine world; we do not take comfort in the perfect (romantic) union of the One and Trinity. In fact, the Matrix (the machines) prevails, and Neo *realizes* what he *has to do*: give up Trinity, sacrifice his 'self', and act in accord with the Other's desire (which 'happens to' resemble his own) by moving toward the 'Lack at the Source', returning to the source. In this sense, what we end up celebrating is the repetition of the narratives we already know: Granted, Zion is no longer under threat of being immediately destroyed, but at the same time its mission to 'end the war', to 'free the minds of those

[202] Pp. 164.

trapped in the Matrix', to rid the earth of the oppressive regime of the machine world, has not reached its culmination. They have not 'succeeded'. They are still 'burdened' with the mission they have always carried at the core of their intentions and passions: to liberate the majority of humanity, which is still 'slave to the system', and to fight to protect the conditions of their own existence. Thus, what we celebrate at the 'end' of *Revolutions* is the repetition of *defining narratives* and the embracing of irresolvable (social) antagonisms. Here we have the distinction between two types of 'revolution': one of revolt and upheaval, and one of repetition. If *Revolutions* was not, for the public at large, as satisfying as *The Matrix*, it is because *The Matrix* tempted us with (utopic) fantasies of radical revolt and (imaginary) self empowerment, whereas *Revolutions* tells us something truer about our real lives: there will be no radical revolt and overthrowing of the system, there will be no resolution to end our struggles and antagonisms - *because we need them*.[203]

What we have with the *Matrix* trilogy is a contemporary reworking of a long-standing narrative form: the epic. As we know, the epic tale is constructed around a central figure, the hero, who must depart from his native land for foreign territory and overcome great trials and rites of passage before he can return (victoriously) home. During the course of his travels, we come to find out that our hero is gifted with superhuman abilities, and that his adventure is not only constituted by a series of physical triumphs, but is also characterized by a highly spiritual or supernatural element; there is always some type of contact with the sacred. All these elements are, I should think, rather evident in the *Matrix* trilogy. What is of particular interest to us is the departure from the fact that the classic epic is often of great cultural importance because it documents certain historical events (accurately or not) and ideologies or aspirations of a culture or nation in a celebratory manner. Though one might argue that the trilogy comments on the socio-economic conditions or implications of late capitalism (regarding the 'worth' of human life in relation to maintaining the functionality of capitalist machinery) to some extent, thereby documenting a particular and central cultural ideology, it by no means celebrates

[203] This theme of depending on our traditional, interpellative (master) narrative is picked up in films such as *Hable con Ella*, *The Whale Rider*, and *The Passion of the Christ*, which will be discussed in the conclusion.

it. If the trilogy ends by suggesting that one cannot but submit to the 'machinery' and ideology of late capitalism, it does so in a manner that suggests that there is simply no other choice, as opposed to elevating the ideology in celebration. Where the classic epic takes the individual hero as the vehicle by which it documents historical events or propagates ideologies, the *Matrix* trilogy inverts this structure and logic by taking historical/ideological conditions of a culture at a specific period in time to comment on the (social, psychic, and spiritual) condition of the individual within that culture. As an epic, though, the trilogy is *about* the individual's struggle to make meaning in his life. Here I would again recall the utterance from Tyler's dialogue in the basement of Lou's Tavern: "Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression's our lives." From this angle, we equally read *Fight Club* as commentary about the inability to sustain healthy symbolic relations, thereby reflecting, or exposing, the very same condition of crisis. What both films illustrate is that the journey our contemporary hero must make is an inward one and the trials and hardships he must suffer have strictly to do with himself as a social being. If these films culturally document anything, they document a cultural condition of crisis regarding the individual and his place within the symbolic (which encompasses his relation to the imaginary and entry into symbolic relations). Though this is not anything entirely new, I would posit that the proliferation of such narratives in popular culture, relative to the 'age' of popular culture, *is*. Popular culture has often dealt with themes such as war (cultural conflict), space exploration ('exploration' of the 'unknown'), the monstrous and horrific, love, freedom (insofar as this implies a break with cultural morays - predominantly in the 1920s and 1960s), and so forth; though rarely has it dealt so acutely and repeatedly with the individual's struggle in relation to the imaginary and symbolic orders - in relation to his social (symbolic) status as it has in the last twenty odd years. Though this is perhaps best thought of in conjunction with identity-related problems in late capitalism, particularly, as Deleuze and Guattari have made explicit, the commonplace of 'schizophrenia' as related to capitalism.

What is likely to be more evident than one initially grants is the 'spiritual' element in such popular narratives. As I have suggested in reference to the epic form, and as noted by Tyler's *our great war is a spiritual war*, the struggle to make symbolic meaning of

one's life is always an inner - and in this regard characteristic of the spiritual - struggle.[204] At the risk of taking a considerable leap here, I would make the claim that popular culture has, in certain respects and particularly in certain genres, 'picked up' where (western) religious narratives have left off. I do not mean to imply that the narrative *texts* of western religion, the bible primarily, are not sufficiently directed at the types of struggle or crisis we are concerned with here. To the contrary, they are precisely concerned with them: with the individual's struggle to make meaning of his life, with questions of subjectivity (that is, becoming a subject in the social fabric), with the complex nature of identifying with the Other's desire. Popular culture does not 'pick up' where these *textual narratives* leave off (though it does recontextualize them), but rather picks up where the *cultural narrative* Religion leaves off. That is, it assumes the function of disseminating narratives that will help individuals understand their struggle, if only by reflecting them. In this regard, it partially assumes a primary function of the meta-narrative Religion. Within the predominance of secular society, one doesn't assume that 'questions' addressed in traditional religious narratives have simply vanished. They have been re-placed.

In what follows, we will be concerned with the way in which popular culture picks up (the function of) religious narratives. I am not so much interested here in pointing out the proliferation of primarily Christian iconic symbols in popular film, but rather the fact that popular narratives have a mystic or spiritual element that can function, in part, as *ersatz* (replacement) narratives for older ones. Being that alien narratives have come to be intimately tied in with or particularly written as conspiracy narratives, and that they almost always incorporate characteristics of Judeo-Christian mythology, let us turn to the alien narrative as the location where conspiracy and spirituality meet in popular culture.

[204] This is not to suggest that 'meaning' is sometimes symbolic and sometimes not. What I want to stress here is that the struggle for meaning is characterized by its 'social', and thus symbolic, status as far as we are concerned here.

Part IV. AlienNation

Guises of the Alien: From Friendship and Fear to Faith

…maybe we're witnessing the birth of a folk religion, with aliens functioning much like the angels who have sprouted all over the country as the millennium approaches.
- Elaine Showalter, *Hystories*

Hundreds of thousands have flocked to temples synagogues and churches. God be with us all.
- Newscaster in M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs*

As with conspiracy, there are different narrative 'types' within the alien genre. In the first type, aliens are characterized as hostile foreign agents who have come to threaten the well being and life style of 'earthlings'. This narrative type is typified by such books as Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1898), and films like Irvin S. Yeaworth Jr.'s *The Blob* (1958) and Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). They often reflect Cold War anxieties about the threat of the unfamiliar 'evil' other that might invade or infiltrate one's land and home at any given moment. This theme was the rule of thumb for alien narratives during the Cold War era: "During the 1950s Hollywood launched repeated extraterrestrial invasions, with a peak between 1956 and 1958, when more than 90 movies were released."[205] This, though, is not to say there weren't other types, nor to say that this specific type didn't persist after the end of the cold war. Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996), for example, is very much in line with this narrative type - it even goes as far as establishing a central element of patriotism in the narrative.[206]

In the 1980s we see a pronounced shift in the tone of the alien narrative. With Spielberg's *ET* (1982) and John Carpenter's *Starman* (1984), we start to see narratives in which a benevolent and curious extra-terrestrial is accidentally stranded on earth and becomes witness to and object of all sorts of animosity and belligerent behavior. This is something of an inversion of the traditional 'threat from outside' that one had become

[205] (Goldberg, pp. 216).
[206] This film, though also has elements of what I will characterize as the third type: the government is in possession of occult knowledge concerning aliens and has kept this knowledge hidden from the public at large.

accustomed to. Now 'we' were the threat. This narrative type is perhaps typical of a decade in which the tenets of political correctness would take hold and bloom. Alien narratives as commentary on social behavior, where the ill treatment of the 'alien' is a trope for racism, for example, become strikingly evident with films such as Graham Baker's *Alien Nation* (1988), in which an alien race already inhabits the earth alongside humans. The story is centered around two police detectives, Det. Samuel 'George' Francisco (Mandy Patinkin) and Det. Sgt. Matthew Sykes (James Caan). Patinkin plays an alien who has just joined the police force, and Caan plays a human veteran cop. When the alien Francisco is assigned a partner, it turns out to by Sykes, who we quickly find out is not happy to be sharing his planet with the new arrivals. A scenario in which Sykes is framed as a 'primitive', stubborn, narrow-minded, and intolerant racist is played out against the more intelligent, levelheaded, and likable alien. Over the course of the narrative, the two become increasingly close, getting to know and understand one another through the time spent working together as a team, until Sykes' racism is 'defused' and his views about the alien race have been transformed.

A third narrative type, the one which has come to be most popular to date, is one in which the alien narrative is intertwined with conspiracy theories, generally implicating some branch of the (United States) government or an even more influential group that represents a clandestine new world order (the Majestic Twelve, the Illuminati, the Freemasons…). As Robert Goldberg suggests in his book *Enemies Within*, ideas about aliens shifted with the increasing popularity of conspiracy theories surrounding the Roswell 'incident' of 1947: "The UFO phenomenon and Roswell became mainstream, not only icons of conspiracism but staples of American popular culture."[207] The popularity of Roswell as a conspiracy gained currency in the early 1990s, with a series of books and television specials. Where alien narratives had been characterized by elements typical to early cold war paranoia and the enemy from without, with Roswell (as pop-narrative) comes a wave of conspiracy theories linking alien and government activity. Roswell is certainly the seminal event that initiated the now common association between aliens and governmental conspiracy. Chris Carter's enormously popular television series *The X-Files*

[207] *Enemies Within: the Culture of Conspiracy in Modern America*. pp. 215.

(1993-2002, Fox Television) reflects, and is largely responsible for, the cultural prominence of (and belief in) alien-government conspiracy theories.[208]

In the series, Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) and Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) are FBI agents who have been assigned to a special unit (called the X-Files) that investigates cases potentially involving the paranormal and extraterrestrial, and almost always the conspiratorial. The narrative trajectory, from the first season to the last, weaves through a series of varied events, many of which point toward a high-level conspiracy involving covert governmental testing on public citizens, cloning, and cooperation with aliens, with each episode coming a bit closer to exposing some horrible truth about the occult 'powers that be', though always falling slightly short of the mark. The show's popularity spawned an onslaught of alien-government conspiracy narratives, such as the television series *Dark Skies* and *Roswell*, and films like *Men In Black* and *The Faculty*. In all of them, we find the typical elements and psychoanalytical implications discussed in the previous section on conspiracy, though the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent Other has a different dynamic: it is both within and without. That is, it is 'one of us', a corrupt government agency, for example, and is truly alien - not accessible, not 'from here'. These two elements are conjoined in an effort to manipulate and control 'the world I live in' from outside of my will and usually against it, though, to begin with, without my knowledge. The tagline for the *X-Files* is "the truth is out there," and the show has made famous the poster hanging in Mulder's office, which shows a flying saucer in the night sky, with the caption at the bottom reading "I want to believe." In these slogans, we can see three tenets typical of and central to conspiracy. First, there is the assumption that an agency is functioning without my knowledge and effecting my life/environment (an omniscient agent 'out there'). Next, there is the assumption that this agency has occult (complete/perfect) knowledge and represents, in this regard, a subject supposed to know ("the truth is out there"). Lastly, there is the assumption that if I gain access to this occult knowledge, meaning in my life will take an entirely new shape and will be 'complete' ("I want to believe").

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[208] See in particular the chapter "The *X-Files* and the Zeitgeist of the '90s" in Jan Delasara's book *PopLit, PopCult and The X-Files: A Critical Exploration*. Additionally, according to Nielsen ratings, the fourth and fifth seasons had an average of nearly twenty million viewers per episode in the U.S. alone, with a season high of over twenty-nine million viewers (for a single episode) in the fourth season.

The correlation of these three elements to conspiracy narratives is a relatively obvious one. There is a belief in a really existing (and often, though not necessarily, malevolent) big Other that one might, with great effort, gain access to. We find the 'belief' in a complete system of knowledge and meaning, where there is no contingency, but only purpose; or, as Michael Barkun puts it, "a universe governed by design rather than by randomness."[209] And we find the 'desire' to access this (Other) knowledge, driven by the idea that it will 'free' me and complete meaning within my world.

This third narrative type (alien/conspiracy), with its prominence in turn of the century popular culture and concern with the subject/Other relationship, is clearly the one closest in character to the (conspiracy) narratives we have considered up to this point. Even in the narratives that don't frame a cooperative conspiracy involving the government and aliens, we will often find, as in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the *Alien* quadrology, *E.T.*, *Independence Day*, and others, a mistrust of the government typical to conspiracy narratives (in each of these films, the government is involved in covert operations), which we might interpret as reference to the crisis of 'not trusting' the big Other; or as we noted with Žižek earlier, the individual is continually finding himself in the position of witnessing how 'reality' is based in symbolic fictions (being conscious of one's symbolic status). That is, 'reality' "is in no way directly grounded in 'facts' as rendered by the scientific 'knowledge in the real'."[210] The frequent portrayal of this 'mistrust' reflects or is symptomatic of this very condition.

Having discussed the socio-cultural implications of conspiracy narratives as a reflection of crisis concerning the social status of the individual (in regard to the symbolic, the imaginary, the subject and the big Other), I would like to bring into focus a particular element we have not yet directly dealt with. Having indicated where alien narratives and conspiracy conjoin, I would like to consider the 'mystical' element within alien narratives, and how this might also reflect back onto conspiracy. What I propose is that we will be able to trace 'the mystical' in alien narratives, which is perhaps obvious, back to conspiracy and out to other popular narrative types that are concerned with the subject/Other relationship, where a mystical element is perhaps not always so obvious.

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[209] *A Culture of Conspiracy*, pp. 3.
[210] Žižek , "The Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion."

In addition to film and television functioning (by default) as primary mediums of public education in the United States, one should also recognize the ways in which "films can and do perform religious and iconoclastic functions in American society."[211] Take, for a rather obvious example, Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of Christ* (2004). In addition to educating masses of people about a certain aspect of biblical mythology, it will allow them to partake in the religious experience of Christ's suffering in an unprecedented manner. According to the evangelical organization Outreach Ministry Inc., the film is "perhaps the best outreach opportunity in 2000 years."[212] If it is a great 'outreach' opportunity, it is because masses of people who go to see it are moved by it, because it calls to a sense of faith in them, because they experience what churches have been attempting to facilitate for centuries: an emotionally charged identification with Christ's suffering, with his values, with the ideology of his teachings.[213] With such a film, we are confronted by a rather undiluted pragmatic approach to addressing the spiritual or mystic 'longings' in contemporary society.

Though the film has been seen by a broad audience and despite its level of high visibility, I don't know that I would classify it among popular culture narratives as one itself simply by virtue of its level of visibility and popularity. It is, after all, an older and infinitely more influential narrative than any we find in popular culture: it is one of the core (historical) narratives defining western society and culture over the last two millennia. Suffice it to say, it is a 'traditional' (and conservative) narrative as opposed to a 'popular' narrative. On the other hand, it serves to illustrate that these 'mystic longings' are most definitely to be found across a broad section of contemporary society and that such longings are addressed through popular media.[214] Though much more than direct portrayals of biblical mythology (such as with Gibson's *Passion*), we find a proliferation of figurative depictions of the western religious heritage, typified by the alien narrative.

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[211] Martin and Ostwalt, *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, preface.
[212] www.thepassionoutreach.com
[213] "My hope is that this movie will effect people on a very profound level and reach them with a message of faith, hope, love and forgiveness." Mel Graham, www.thepassionoutreach.com.
[214] With this, one should perhaps also acknowledge an indication of how popular religion and spirituality are reflected through politics, turn of the century millennialism and eschatology, new age spiritualism, and a rise in Evangelicalism in the U.S.

Aliens, who descend to the earth like ancient sky gods, are always regarded with awe and fear. As John Saliba points out in "Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena," there are several ways in which the alien encounter or UFOs can function in a religious or mystical capacity: aliens appear to have a "spiritual or transhuman nature," resembling "gods, supernatural heroes, angels and devils."[215] Some of the religious themes he ascribes UFO encounters, which are likewise applicable to most alien narratives, are mystery, transcendence, perfection, salvation, and spirituality. To these I would add damnation and benevolence. We witness tropes for damnation, so characteristic of the mythology of the Old Testament, in films where the alien, as the wrathful Other, comes to vent its fury on earthlings (*Signs*, *Independence Day*). Depictions of benevolence, more characteristic of the New Testament (particularly with Christ's teachings), can be found predominantly in the 1980s films I mentioned above. Also, aliens are almost always encoded as possessing a knowledge that far surpasses human knowledge. Parallels might be drawn here to what we would traditionally consider divine knowledge in the biblical tradition (omniscience, as we also find in conspiracy narratives). John Saliba points out that essential to any UFO cult or religion is the transmission of "prophetic messages, religious teachings, and moral instructions from aliens to humans."[216] Accompanying this divine knowledge the aliens possess are capabilities to match their knowledge: divine powers or omnipotence, again as in conspiracy.

The section that follows will provide a short survey of various alien films from the perspective of the mystical, starting with those which depict the arrival of a benevolent being who comes at a time of need and performs 'miracles', the culmination of which is healing the individual in crisis, re-placing them in his or her social context.

other Gods: the Savoir-Christ Motif

Steven Spielberg's *E.T.* (1982) is a story structured around the relationship between a young boy, Elliot (Henry Thomas), and an other-world visitor who goes by the

[215] "Religious Dimensions of UFO Phenomena," in *The Gods Have Landed*, pp. 41.
[216] Ibid, pp 27.

appellation E.T. As the story opens, we quickly come to see that Elliot is experiencing anxieties typical to prepubescent childhood: feeling excluded, awkward, and misunderstood. Moreover, his parents have recently divorced and his father is simply gone, a condition that plays the central role in a collective family crisis. The arrival of E.T., his sickness that ensues as a result of being separated from his home and people, and the subsequent mission to return him to his people, function as a trope for the struggle that Elliot is himself enduring. Not unlike E.T.'s plight, the film opens with an illustration of a 'broken' home (though love is still present in the home) and the 'lost' individual/child, Elliot. With E.T.'s arrival, Elliot is provided a mirror for his fears and his affections. In this regard, one could also read the film as a retelling of the 'imaginary friend' narrative.[217] The trope becomes still more explicit when, at a certain point in the story, Elliot begins to experience the same physical sickness as E.T. As E.T.'s and Elliot's condition worsens, a group of what we assume to be governmental agents appear on the scene with the apparent intent to abduct the alien into their custody, though the scene quickly transforms into a state of emergency, as Elliot and E.T. are dying. At the film's peripatetic moment, Elliot's condition suddenly and radically improves as E.T.'s worsens, indicating that they have now separated from one another. With this separation, Elliot is entirely cured (he is 'saved'), and E.T. must die at this point (sacrificed), only to be resurrected shortly afterward and ascend into the heavens. The allegorical subtext of E.T. as Christ figure is rather explicit in this regard. What we witness in E.T. is a humanitarian 'savoir' and a performer of miracles. As Georg Seesslen points out, "not only does E.T. heal Elliot's wounds…he also facilitates a new sense of community between the siblings."[218] He is also of superior intelligence, is loved and championed by a small group of 'followers' and pursued by an ominous ruling entity who, according to Elliot, kills him ("leave him alone, you're killing him!"), after which he is resurrected, and enacts an 'ascension'. Moreover, if we also read E.T. as a mirror for Elliot and a trope for the traumatic events he must traverse, we should also recognize that in Elliot's assistance in resurrecting and freeing E.T., allowing him to return to health and home, we have another

[217] See Seesslen here: "Aber in Elliots Persoenlichkeit hat das Verschwinden des Vaters etwas endgültiges getan; E.T. kommt da, um ein wirklich boeses Loch in seiner Seele zu füllen" (*Steven Spielberg und Seine Filme*, pp. 50).
[218] "E.T. hat nicht nur Elliots Wunde geheilt…er hat auch die Geschwister zu einer neün Gemeinschaft gebracht…" (Ibid, my translation).

mirroring of what E.T. has performed for Elliot. These two lost ('forsaken') children must traverse the traumatic space laid out before them in order to be 'saved' - in order to find their proper place within ('back to') the social fabric.

The function of the visitor from another world in *E.T.* is not unlike that in John Carpenter's *Starman*, where the alien visits an individual equally 'in need'. The film begins with the collision of an alien aircraft, and thus once again, an alien other is abandoned on earth, and subsequently meets the person he will help recover from some trauma. Jenny Hayden (Karen Allen), who lives in a remote region of thickly forested land, finds herself very much alone and still mourning the death of her husband until he suddenly materializes in her living room. Again, we can already see how we might read the narrative as one of fantasy projection, like the 'imaginary friend' motif in *E.T.* The alien explains to Jenny that he has assumed the appearance of her deceased husband in order not to frighten her, in order to meet her with a familiar and trusted face.

Also similar to *E.T.* are the elements of the alien being pursued by a group of agents who seek to capture and detain him, and although Jenny is initially skeptical about helping Starman (Jeff Bridges), with her help he manages to elude his pursuers and return home. In this regard, we again see how the alien helps the individual to find a purpose, which when it is realized and the goal achieved, their will be some (social) reward, placing them again in a social capacity that they find meaningful. As Starman is able to perform miracles (he restores a deer that a hunter has shot back to life and frees it), he repays Jenny for her help and affection by helping her to conceive a child, something doctors told her would be impossible. Thus, we once again witness an alien that is abandon ('forsaken') and pursued by hostile agents (though in both *E.T.* and *Starman*, there is always one 'good' agent interested in helping the alien achieve its mission), who is a humanitarian, performer of miracles, possessor of divine knowledge and powers, and returns to the heavens after helping ('saving') the individual in need.

With *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997) we have, if not a broader spectrum of what the alien represents, two sides of the same coin: the savior and the anti-Christ. As we often see, alien films with heavy religious emphasis generally focus on either 'good' aliens (and bad humans) or 'bad' aliens (pitted against good humans), but here we have a

'cosmic battle' or 'Armageddon' between good and evil, the outcome of which is dependant upon the role humans will play in this exchange. There is, on the one side of the conflict, an amorphous evil energy in the form of a gigantic fiery sphere waiting to consume the earth. Working in the service of this amorphous evil are the 'bad' alien mercenaries and Zorg (Gary Oldman), evil's human agent. The mercenary aliens might be thought of as demons in the same way that 'good' aliens can often function as a trope for gods or angels.

At the beginning of the film, we witness an alien race that visits the earth in order retrieve a set of four stones designed to assist in the cosmic battle against evil. These aliens are the keepers of 'goodness' and of the 'fifth element' that will help to overcome evil when it comes to destroy the earth and the rest of the universe. In this regard, we should view them as angel-like, working in the service of a good god and against evil in this cosmic Armageddon. The fifth element, Leeloo (Milla Jovovich), is the savior who will come from the heavens in defense of all of humanity, with the tradition of priests on earth protecting the temple to which she must return in order to conquer evil. The ability for this savior to function is not contingent upon sacrifice in any traditional sense, but rather upon a different *proof of love*. In this way, she both differs from and is like a traditional Christ. In addition to ascending from the heavens, to having to withstand great physical feats, and to defeating 'the bad guys', a consummation of human worth is required, proof of a fifth earthly element, so to speak, that will effectively be the salvation of humanity. The element particularly accentuated through her character is this element of 'love' (physical, romantic and agape): love is framed here as what is absolutely essential in the human experience and what substantiates human worth. The tradition of 'godly' love and tolerance is one that stems primarily from the New Testament teachings of Christ in biblical mythology (Leeloo is likewise overwhelmed and appalled when she is confronted with images of war and mass destruction from human history). But where the New Testament Christ propagates the teachings of love through selflessness and sacrifice (through agape love), the one we see here is much more in line with our contemporary sensibilities: if someone does not love her (romantically), she will die in vain. Thus, the love portrayed here is a consummate act in the positive: something gained through addition, as opposed to something achieved through negation or sacrifice (a

consummate act in the negative; something gained through loss, as with Jesus). In the very last moment, as the savior is about to die, a proof of human worth is substantiated by a kiss and profession of love, halting the fiery ball in its propulsion toward earth a moment before impact. Thus, facilitated by 'love', the fifth element saves all of humanity.

Other Worlds: Tropes for Heaven

In Ron Howard's *Cocoon* (1985), a group of elderly retirees, who are coming to the age when their health is beginning to fail and their friends and loved ones are dying around them, discover a 'fountain of youth' in a neighboring pool. After bathing a couple of times in the pool, which they must covertly enter, as it is in the private garden of a nearby estate, their illnesses go into full remission and they become as sexually potent as teenagers with seething hormones ("You've got a boner too!?"). What they don't initially know is that a group of aliens have rented the estate and are using the pool to temporarily store cocoons encasing alien colleagues who they had to leave behind some ten thousand years earlier. Here, as in *E.T.*, the aliens are of a higher intelligence, are benevolent, can perform miracles, and the like. Additionally, they can fly and appear to be made of light, not unlike angels of western mythology. What the trajectory of this narrative aims at is the departure of the elderly for 'another world'. Toward the end of the film, the aliens offer to take the small group of humans they have gotten to know and about thirty of their friends with them, promising an eternity of wellness and "productive lives." The humans decide to accept the offer. After their decision, Joe (Wilford Brimley) realizes that he must speak with his grandson (Barret Oliver), whom he spends a lot of time with, and explain their imminent departure to him. The dialogue here conspicuously resembles an elderly family member who perceives impending death preparing someone much younger for an inevitable separation:

> Joe: I got a couple of things I need to talk about with ya… I guess me and your grandma are goin' away David.
> David: Where to?
> Joe: Well, that's not important. What's important is that when we get where we're goin', we'll never be sick, we won't get any older, and we won't ever die…

David: Would I be able to visit you and grandma?
Joe: No. And we wouldn't be able to visit you either, and that kinda bothers me.
David: I'd never see you again?
Joe: No.
David: When would you go, if you did?
Joe: Soon my boy, soon. And ya know where?
David: Where?
Joe: Look up. Outer space, my lad, outer space.

One immediately recognizes a trope for going to heaven here. Once the aliens and the elderly depart, a spacecraft having raised the boat they were all on into the sky and brought it into the bowels of the craft (another ascension), it is assumed that they all died at sea, and there is a collective funeral service held for them. The reverend (Harold Bergman) gives the following speech:

> There can never be an accounting, in human terms, for the tragedy at sea which has taken the lives of these men and women in what should have been a beautiful and peaceful sunset of their lives. Do not fear. Your loved ones are in safe keeping. They have moved on to a higher expression of life. Not life as we know it, but in the spirit everlasting. Our loved ones are in good hands for now, and forever more.

With the knowledge that they have actually been 'saved' from death by aliens and granted everlasting life, the monologue takes on an ironic element for David (underscored by David's gazing up into the sky at the end of the speech and smiling knowingly to himself), as the people haven't died according to the way he understands their departure, though everything the reverend says is nonetheless true; that is, the priest's monologue mirrors what Joe had explained to his grandson. This mirroring offers an exposed structure for the metaphor we are to understand - it 'spoon-feeds' us the trope for heaven implicit in the alien narrative.

Robert Zemeckis' *Contact* (1997), starring Jodie Foster, is equally explicit in this manner. The story is about an individual who is fascinated with radio communication from a very young age. As the film opens, we see young Ellie (Jena Malone) sitting at a table radioing in an attempt to simply contact anyone. She gets a response from Pensacola, Florida. This is her furthest radio contact to date, reaching from the northern to the southern United States. Later, she asks her father (David Morse) about the

possibilities of reaching distant places, such as China, the moon, Jupiter, Saturn, to which he continually answers that it depends on the size of the radio. Then she asks if he thinks they could reach her mother, whom we soon realize is deceased. He responds that not the biggest radio can reach that far, and kisses her goodnight. She gets out of bed after he leaves the room and gets back on the radio, calling out into the static to anyone who will answer, when she decides she needs a bigger antenna. Here we cut to a scene some several years later, she (Foster) is a young doctor, and she is at the sight of a massive satellite dish she will be using for research. Within these first couple of scene, the narratival premise begins to take a tangible form: she has lost her mother as a child and, since then, is obsessed with making contact with what ever (other) she can in as remote a region as possible. With this we have the suggestion of the mother being somewhere 'out their' in the 'heavens'. In support of this assumption, we are again 'spoon-fed' the implicit metaphor: Later, when we find out that her father died when she was nine, there is a flashback to his death and his funeral. During the funeral reception at the house, we see Ellie up in her room at her radio calling out over the airwaves: "This is W9GFO. Do you copy? Dad this is Ellie, come back… Dad, are you there? Come back."

As with *Starman*, the individual who has lost someone dear to her or him will meet an alien who assumes the appearance of the lost beloved, and this encounter will end in a sublation of the trauma caused by the initial loss.[219] Ellie makes contact with the aliens via a machine built, apparently, for remote space travel, the plans for which were sent by the aliens via deep space radio transmission. When Ellie pilots the machine to this 'other world', she meets her father on some fantastical island shore. In being able to once again meet her father's likeness, she has effectively fulfilled her childhood dream of contacting the deceased. Once she does make this contact and returns to earth, the passage of which spans a matter of seconds according to earth time, there is doubt as to the validity of her claims. On earth, it appeared as if the craft she travels in had simply fell from its launching apparatus to the ground. In her own defense, she states the following:

> I had an experience. I can't prove it. I can't even explain it. But everything that I know as a human being, everything that I am, tells me that it was real. I was given something

[219] Incidentally, we also witness this type of 'Oedipal plentitude' in *A.I.*, where the child is reunited with his deceased mother for one day at the doing of a group of aliens who grant him this wish.

> wonderful, something that changed me forever. A vision of the universe that tells us undeniably how tiny and insignificant and how rare and precious we all are, a vision that tells us that we are a part of something that is greater than ourselves, that we are not, that none of us are alone. I wish I could share that. I wish that everyone, if even for one moment, could feel that awe and humility and hope, but [pause], that continues to be my wish.

Although she is convinced of the validity of her experience and the scientific nature of her travel and contact, convinced that it is by no means a fantasy nor a religious 'encounter', her speech clearly mirrors Father Palmer Joss' (Matthew McConaughey) explanation of his first and decisive spiritual encounter: "I was lying just looking at the sky. And then I felt something, I don't know. All I know is that I wasn't alone. And for the first time I wasn't scared of nothin', not even of dying. It was God." The parallel between an alien entity and a divine entity is again explicitly framed when a fanatical preacher from some religious sect calls out to the crowd that has assembled in either protest or celebration of the recent contact with aliens: "Now these scientists have had their chance. Are these the kind of people that you want talking to your God for you?" At another point, the significance of the events that have been taking place is not pinned on a contingency of whether they are 'in fact' a divine encounter or an alien encounter. Rather, their significance is constituted through a matter of perspective: "Ironically, the thing that people are most hungry for, meaning, is the one thing that science hasn't been able to give them" (Father Joss). Thus we see how what is important is not differentiating between aliens and God, but deciding how we want to read this alien Otherness, exposing precisely what is at stake in such alien films: "For as long as I can remember I've been searching for something, some reason why we're here. What are we doing here, who are we? If this is the chance to find out even a little part of that answer, I don't know, I think it's worth a human life" (Ellie). What is at stake is the search for meaning through an Otherness, which has also always accompanied our western notions of God.

Faith, Lost and Found

In M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs* (2002), a reverend who has lost his wife in an auto accident decides to give up his faith, not long after which he and his family are visited by

malevolent aliens. After an initial incident of seeing someone creeping around his house at night and finding an unusually large and symmetrical shape pressed into his wheat fields, Graham Hess (Mel Gibson) phones the police to report the prank. While questioning the family, the officer (Cherry Jones) asks: "Do you two have anyone who might have a grudge or something against you, maybe a church member, who might not have liked the fact that you left the church?" Though he responds in the negative, the question begs a rather obvious answer: God. The logic of this question and answer in relation to the cause of its asking (the arrival of aliens) would suggest that God has sent these aliens as some sort of agent. We can read them as a divine message, or, at least, within the scope of God's providence and not a mere unforeseen chance event. As we will later see, the epistemological trajectory that the reverend must traverse is one from providence to contingency, and back again. This trajectory hinges on Graham's understanding or interpretation of his dying wife's last words. Where he originally thinks they are an incoherent verbalization of mixed memories, he later realizes that they express a precognition.

As the nature of the strange incidents becomes clear to the characters in the narrative, eschatological fear takes hold, and the narrative takes on even greater mystical overtones, suggestive, as so many narratives were in the second half of the 1990s (and as we have already seen with *The Fifth Element*), of the book of Revelations and apocalyptic mythos:

> Merrill: Some people are probably thinking this is the end of the world. Do you think it could be?
> Graham: Yes.
> Merrill: How can you say that?
> Graham: That wasn't the answer you wanted?
> Merrill: Couldn't we pretend like it used to be?
> Graham: People break down into two groups. When they experience something lucky, group number one sees it as more than luck, more than coincidence. They see it as a sign, evidence, that there is someone up there watching out for them. Group number two sees it as just pure luck, a happy turn of chance. Sure there are people in group two who are looking at those fourteen lights in a very suspicious way. For them, the situation is a fifty-fifty: could be bad, could be good, but deep down, they feel that whatever happens, they're on their own, and that fills them with fear. Yeah, there are those people. But there's a whole lot of people in the group number one, and they see those fourteen lights, they're looking at a miracle. And deep down, they feel that whatever's going to happen, there'll be someone there to help them, and that fills them with hope. See, what you have to ask yourself is what kind of person are you. Are you the kind that sees signs, sees miracles, or do you believe that people just get lucky? Or, look at the question this way: Is it possible that there are no coincidences?

Again, it is a question of the epistemological approach to the ontological nature of being: do we believe that our lives are guided by providence or 'float' in contingency? Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix) explains that he is a believer (in miracles), and he gives a small anecdote from his past as proof to both Graham and himself, it seems. Then, he asks Graham which kind of person he is. To which Graham responds, "do you feel comforted?" Merrill tells him he does, and Graham says, "then what does it matter? I never told you the last words that Colleen said before they let her die. She said, 'see', and then her eyes glazed a bit. And then she said, 'swing away'. You know why she said that? Because the nerve endings in her brain were firing as she died, and some random memory of us at one of your baseball games just popped into her head. There is no one watching out for us Merrill. We are all on our own." Where Merrill's anecdote illustrated that he is a believer in miracles, Graham's tells us that he is not, that he sees no greater meaning behind the events in our lives, that life consists of a string of chance occurrences, unaccounted for fortune and misfortune.

Interspersed through the film are moments that illustrate Graham's loss of faith: he asks the town's people he comes into contact with not to call him father anymore, for example. When a girl at the local pharmacy pleads with him to let her confess her sins because she fears the end of the world might be near, he tries to refuse. He also refuses to pray. After having boarded up the house in anticipation of an attack, each person in the family chooses their favorite meal, and they cook a feast. The suggestion, of course, is that it may be their last meal. Then, as they are sitting at the table, there is an immense amount of tension. The son, Morgan (Rory Culkin) says, "Maybe we should say a prayer." To which Graham replies, "No," but the boy persists, "Why not?" Graham replies: "We're not saying a prayer… I am not wasting one more minute of my life on prayer. Not one more minute."

With Graham's framing the question of the possibility that there are no coincidences against his statement that no one is "watching out for us," we understand that he has adopted a belief system based on chance and contingency. There is not a greater purpose behind the events that take place in our lives; there is simply chance, and one condition or event giving rise to another. The decisive moment in the film of his *reemergence into*

faith takes place during a confrontation with an alien in the living room. Thinking that the aliens have left, the family exits the basement, where they had boarded themselves up for defense, in search of the boy's medicine. He is asthmatic, and has been without his medicine through the night. Graham lays his son down on the couch and goes to fetch the television from the closet. When he returns a moment later, an alien is standing by the couch with Morgan hanging from one of his arms. Graham tells everybody not to move, though he appears to have no idea what to do next, and then a memory of his wife's death flashes through his mind. We get a flashback of her last words, "it was meant to be… Tell Morgan to play games, it's okay to be silly. Tell Bo to listen to her brother, he'll always take care of her… And tell Graham, tell him 'see', tell him to see. And tell Merrill to swing away." Then the flashback cuts to the scene in which Graham tells Merrill about the two kinds of people, and we get a close-up of Graham saying, "See, what you have to ask yourself is what kind of person are you. Are you the kind that sees signs, sees miracles, or do you believe that people just get lucky? Is it possible that there are no coincidences?" In this moment *every sign falls into place* and he 'realizes' that there are no coincidences, that there is meaning behind all events and conditions.[220] We then cut back to the living room; Graham looks over at his brother. Hanging on the wall next to Merrill is his trophy baseball bat from when he hit a homerun ball 507 feet. Graham takes his dying wife's words and tells him, "swing away Merrill. Merrill, swing away." Merrill takes the bat and hits the alien on the back, causing it to drop Morgan. When he hits it again and it falls against a table, causing water to spill onto its shoulder, we see that water burns its flesh. Suddenly, all of the glasses of water the little daughter, Bo (Abigail Breslin), has been leaving around the house as a nervous habit take on new meaning. Merrill looks around the room and there are clusters of half full glasses of water everywhere. He begins hitting them toward the alien. Then, with one final bat-breaking swing, he pelts the alien across the room, slamming it into a cupboard and onto the floor. The glasses atop the cupboard fall on its head and it dies. Graham has meanwhile taken the children outside and administered a shot to Morgan, who is now completely motionless. During the confrontation, the alien had taken the son, who was having an

[220] We should note here the similarity to conspiracy, in which no sign is arbitrary and there is no contingency.

asthma attack, and sprayed poison into his face. Now, outside the house, it appears that the son is dead, though Graham holds him in his arms and says, "that's why he had asthma. It can't be luck. His lungs were closed. No poison got in." Then Merrill reaches down to feel his neck and realizes he is not breathing. Graham says, "don't touch him. Give him a minute. Give him a second." Then, in what is clearly a plea to God, Graham begs, "don't." Suddenly, we hear Morgan's voice, "What happened? Did someone save me?" To which a crying Graham replies, "Yeah, baby, I think someone did." Here we have a play around the word 'save', with the boy being saved from death and with Graham being 'saved' in terms of being brought (back) to faith.

In the next scene, we realize that some time has past. The camera shot pans across Graham's bedroom, and through the windows we see snow falling. Graham emerges from his bathroom and is dressed in reverend's attire, there is children's laughter coming from downstairs, and the film ends. As with *E.T.* and *Contact*, the 'sanctity' and 'wholeness' of home, the core location of the social fabric, has been restored, and though the film doesn't portray aliens or outer space as a clear trope for the mystic itself (as God, or angel, or heaven), it does clearly frame the alien as inciting spiritual identification and as an agent of God's providence.

Faith, Lost and Found II: Myth *à discrétion*

Like the previous narratives, in *Titan A.E.* (2000, directed by Don Bluth and Gary Goldman) we again find an essential uprooting of/at home. The story begins with the separation of a young boy and his father. As the narrative develops, we witness the resentment the boy, now maturing, harbors as a result of his father having 'abandoned' him (here, again, we might recall Christ's "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" from the Book of Psalms, and also the fact that many of these narratives deal with either a child who has lost a parent, or a person who has lost a loved one). Part of what the trajectory of the narrative aims at is the resolution of this trauma (its sublation and concomitant recontextualization) accompanied by the boy's fulfilling an all-important mandate, which will, in turn, both recreate the earth, and save the whole of the human

race. We might read this as a trope for entry into the symbolic - establishing the condition/location *the social fabric*, and populating it with 'lost' subjects, including 'myself'. Though one can't ignore the Christ-savior reference here as well.

Throughout *Titan A.E.* the narrative is concerned with the two key elements of damnation and salvation, and through these it continually references biblical mythology. The humans have evoked the wrath of the demon-like Dredge, extra-terrestrial beings possessing vast power and knowledge and who are made of 'pure energy', but feel threatened by some great machine the humans have invented, called the Titan project.

> Once in a great while mankind unlocks a secret so profound, that our future is altered forever: fire, electricity, splitting the atom. At the dawn of the thirty-first century, we unlocked another. It had the potential to change humanity's role in the universe. We called it the Titan project, and it was a testament to the limitless power of the human imagination. Perhaps that is what the Dredge feared most, for it brought them down upon us without warning and without mercy. Cale, that day, the day the Dredge descended from the sky, the only thing that mattered was keeping you safe.[221]

In western mythology, the allusion is manifold. First, there is the name Titan. What is most often associated with the Titans is that they, Cronus in particular, fathered the Olympians. At the core of Cronus' fathering the Olympians is the narrative of Zeus overthrowing Cronus (who had in his turn castrated Uranus, his father) and the Titans. With this, we should keep in mind the idea of a threat posed by the progeny of gods.

What the Titan machine in the film represents is humankind's capacity for creation. The machine is replete with DNA codes for all animals and has the capacity to recreate earth, with its natural habitat and all the species that inhabit it (also suggestive of the Arc myth of biblical mythos). When we plug in the following quote here of the Dredge fearing what the human race "might become," it can only be fear of humans becoming like gods; that is, usurping their position the way the Olympians did with the Titans: Cale asks, "What did the human race ever do to the Dredge?" to which Korso (Bill Pullman) responds, "It's not what we did. It's what we might become." With the Titan machine, the humans have the same generative potential as God in book one of Genesis; that is, they have the *knowledge* required to create (the fruit of the tree of knowledge), and they have the means to create (fruit of the tree of life), and in these terms we would think of humans

[221] Voice over of Professor Sam Tucker (Ron Perlman), Cale's father, at the film's opening.

becoming 'like gods'. This on the one hand mirrors the Olympians' overthrow of the Titans, but this is also where Biblical mythology picks up the thread of the threat posed by the progeny of gods from classical mythology. Adam and Eve and all of their offspring were damned to lives of toil and mortality for eating of the tree of knowledge, and were expelled from the Garden for fear that they might eat of the tree of life, and thus become as gods: "And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever: Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden."[222] When we consider that this is what the Titan machine stands for, that it represents the potential attainment of both knowledge and (eternal) life, and the descent of these alien beings from the sky who have come to destroy humankind and its new creation (particularly because of its new creation), the narrative is suddenly loaded with reference to the 'lapsarian moment' in Christian mythology. Here, the destruction of earth, scattering humans diasporaly through the universe, equals expulsion from the Garden. Though from a certain perspective, the narrative's trajectory will be somewhat different from biblical mythos, something closer to the Greek mythology of the Titans and the Olympians, in which the progeny of the gods' return with a vengeance, usurping the prototypical Ur-father's seat, his Law, and his capacity for generative enjoyment. Thus, insofar as we view the Dredge as the 'hand of God' (the Father's castrative 'No!'), as it were, and thus the agency through which the humans are expelled from earth, as Adam and Eve from the Garden, we witness a fall and expulsion, though one in which the Garden is regained or 'found again' (we might also read this as post-apocalyptic salvation at the return of the Christ). This, again, illustrates our contemporary tendency (which is by no means exclusively contemporary) to manipulate familiar narratives, a 'castrative narrative' in the case of the Garden myth, so that they end by aligning themselves with our fantasies, as we saw with *A.I.* - another castration narrative that ends by indulging in a fantasy of subverting castration.[223]

In *Titan A.E.* we find a mixture of motifs that draw on various elements in western mythology: themes of damnation and salvation (specifically as they relate back to the Fall

[222] Genesis 3: 22-23.
[223] Here I would again point out that this is why the third installment of *The Matrix* 'disappoints': castration is ultimately enacted, rather than subverted, and this goes against the trend pointed out here.

of Man and the Garden of Eden), the Arc myth (a second damnation on all of humanity), the myth of the apocalypse, in which the earth as we know it is to be destroyed (the dead are to be raised, a great battle fought, and, ultimately, earth is to be transformed into heaven - post-apocalyptic utopia). As for myths of salvation, the Christ-son who will return as humanity's savior is, rather prominent: "That ship means everything. Humanity depends on you finding it," says Tek (Ton Loc) to Cale (Matt Damon). And if this menagerie of Christian mythology weren't sufficient, there is, as has been noted, the reference to the Titans and their relation to the Olympians.

What I wish to stress with this brief survey of alien narratives, detailing the various elements of Biblical and other mythology they draw on, is the tendency for popular narratives to bring the mystical into our contemporary narratives, that they 're-place' these myths, that they are 'recontextualizing' archetypes that are basic to our narratives. Jodi Dean says of alien abduction: "Narratives of abduction reconfigure the present's acceptance of passivity, suspicion, paranoia, and loss as, themselves, forms of action."[224] The statement is valid relative to notions of agency and conspiracy we have already discussed, though we might also posit a correlation to central tenets of Christian mythology here: passivity to piety, suspicion to belief, paranoia to guilt, and loss to sacrifice. In so doing, we can see how a 'transplanting' of the narratival location (from Christian mythology to popular narratives) at which certain anxieties are reflected and addressed takes shape.

Additionally, it is worth noting that as narratives which couch otherness and Otherness in a mystical tradition, alien narratives also point to how Biblical mythology is itself structured around a similar premise of concern with the subject-Other relationship.[225] How can we relate this back to conspiracy? Considering some of the more general elements of religious or spiritual narratives might be instructive for drawing a line from the spiritual or mystical nature of alien narratives back to conspiracy narratives.

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[224] *Aliens in America*, pp. 777.

[225] Here we should invert the argument that the Lacanian big Other itself has god-like or mystical characteristics and say that it is the Christian God that has characteristics of the Lacanian big Other.

In his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Émile Durkheim points out that "[o]ne notion considered characteristic of everything religious is the notion of the supernatural. This means any order of things beyond our understanding: the supernatural is the world of mystery, the unknowable, the incomprehensible."[226] This element is rather explicitly placed in the fore of alien narratives. There is mystery shrouding what aliens look like, how they travel, where they come from (a nebulous 'out there'), and so forth. Additionally, aliens are generally depicted as possessing supernatural abilities and, as we've noted, occult knowledge. In these capacities, aliens are not very different from agents of conspiracy, who are necessarily also always shroud in mystery. One never knows precisely who they are, where they come from, or what they intend. There is about them also a supernatural presence: they seem to be always secretly present, omnipresent, and in addition have a divine-like overview of the conditions of all things at all times, omniscience, which allows them complete control, omnipotence. We should also think of the supernatural in relation to contingency, whose negative ('providence') plays the central role in conspiracy.

Durkheim also points out that in order for there to be an idea of the supernatural, there first has to be an idea of the natural, "that the phenomena of the universe are connected to one another according to certain necessary relationships called laws."[227] Here again we are able to see where aliens and agents of conspiracy fall outside of the pail of the 'natural', that they do not function according to the commonly accepted laws that determine the necessary connectedness of contingent phenomena. Rather, they function according to their own set of laws and principles, which they have the capacity to manipulate according to what their objectives are. Important here is again the idea of providence versus contingency, and that the alien/conspiring agent is capable of establishing and manipulating conditions in a providential manner in which the only point of contingency is the 'desire' of the malign Other.

Another central aspect of the mystico-religious we should consider is that of divinity. Our contemporary use of 'divine' is not far from the Latin *divinus*, meaning *pertaining to a deity*. In western mysticism, we have a tradition of spirituality that, however abstract,

[226] Pp. 26.
[227] Pp. 28.

almost always encompasses an idea of a deity or deities *specifically* with regard to the human's relation to it/them. The structure of this is not unlike that in alien and conspiracy narrative, where there is the continual stress on the fact that one is 'not alone' and that there is always someone/thing 'out there'. Thus the idea of comfort (or its inverse) taken in the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent Other who offers structure and meaning to the commonality of everyday life can be seen to transform into the hysterical (in Lacanian analysis, neurosis concerning the nature of the *position of the individual*) pleasure taken in believing in the 'threat' of the Other's desire as it is embodied by the all-knowing, all-powerful, and ever-present conspiratorial agent or alien race who might, at any time, impose their will on me, for that is precisely what I desire. When we consider what is 'between' this Other and the individual - that is, what ties the individual or gives it 'access' to the Other - we inevitably arrive at the notion of rites, which in turn brings us back to the notion of occult knowledge. The individual on the 'outside' of conspiracy is excluded from the knowledge and potency of conspiring agents, and believes that membership within the conspiratorial unit is encoded with all kinds of very rigid rites and rituals, the secretly shared practice of which is intimately tied to an idea of privilege. Here again, with the elements of rite and ritual, we can draw a parallel to characteristics central to mysticism in western mythos and practice. We might, in fact, propose the cultural narrative of conspiracy as a symptom of the lack of rigidly structured sacred rites and rituals in society, or the symptom of a society in which the operative force of sacred rites and rituals has substantially diminished.[228]

Considering the historical role of religion in the United States, it is not surprising that we find the multiform proliferation of mystico-religious related narratives (in fiction, and otherwise) that we do. From the Christian elements in Vampire narratives - the Vampire itself a sort of inverted Christ, and, notably, the production-rate of which in Hollywood is stupefying (a search in the Internet Movie Database for 'vampire' produces results for *several hundred* films, many of which were made over the last ten years) - to the frenetic production of apocalypse narratives at the turn of the century, 'mystic' narratives populate the contemporary fiction landscape. The malleability of traditional myth is likewise based

[228] Pit, for example, the West against the Middle East.

in a tradition of flux. As early as the 17th century, America had already made its way from Protestantism, through Puritanism, to Sectarianism.[229]

What we see with such narratives is, on the one hand, an attempt to try to recontextualize historically defining narratives so that they fit certain aspects of contemporary experience (though these recontextualizations are, for the most part, hardly radical enough) according to our fantasies (a 'return' to Eden, as for example in *Titan A.E.*, which equals a 'return to the womb' or a subversion of castration, as we also saw with *A.I.* and several depictions of utopian realization throughout the various narratives discussed here). Again, I would suggest that through such methods of narratival development, what we end up with is (perhaps necessary) patchwork ideologies (new age spiritualism) and identities (identity as strictly performative). In constructing such narratives and in 'identifying' with such narratives, one is acting in support of the cultural maxim, 'anything is possible'. This seems a logical response to (mild) cultural change, wherein which the defining narratives are adapted to fit their contemporary climate (the transition from stories that stress the importance of 'nuclear' family values, for example, to stories that stress the importance of family values as applicable to the single parent, to gay couples, to adoptive parents, to multiracial families…). There is, though, a distinctive difference between when this 'works' and when it doesn't: its (socially) positive functionality being dependant on whether the reiteration of the narrative is a response to and speaks in accord with the fantasy of the ego (imaginary) or the shifting desire of the Other (the symbolic), a distinction that will be the focus of the conclusion of this work.

The more radical move, on the other hand, is a tendency to 'divorce' ourselves (to the extent that this is actually possible) from our historically defining narratives and interpellative machinery. This (even if it often misses; that is, adheres to the imaginary) is

[229] There was concern for the evolutionary fracturing of religious identification from relatively early on: "Sir Nicholas Bacon (father of Francis) expressed an Elizabethan fear that a certain train of undesirable events would determine that religion 'which of its own nature should be uniform, would against his nature have proven milliform, yea, in continuance nulliform'" (Bremer, p.147). Collinson makes reference to the paradox of what Puritanism gave way to - 'pluralistic and tolerant religious individualism' - and what its intentions pointed toward: 'unitive and intolerant' (Bremer, p.151). One of the primary attributes he discusses in this development is the 'conventicles'- "private religious meetings… formalized by Cotton [Mather] in Boston"- "a special term embracing at one extreme subversive, criminal conspiracies having nothing to do with religion, and at the other religious gatherings without any subversive, criminal intent" (Bremer, p.163). What was, whether intended or not, subversive was that these meetings were to a greater extent exclusive and finally reformatory, thus giving rise to a greater potential for fracture and pluralism.

rooted in a tradition at the center of the American cultural experience: the core cultural narrative that is the American Dream. Within the tradition of the American Dream itself, we can already trace a history of both of these tendencies: the tendency to rework traditional defining narratives and the tendency to simply reinvent oneself in a 'denial' of one's past. A look at the historical trajectory of the Dream should provide us with a proper contemporary context for both mystical narratives and reinvention narratives as they relate to identity in American culture.

Part V. The American Dream

Mysticism, Freedom, and the American Dream: 'America' as Phantasmatic Space

What makes the American Dream American is not that our dreams are any better, worse, or any more interesting than anyone else's, but that we live in a country constituted of dreams.
- Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*

…the puritan legacy to subsequent American culture lies not in theology or logic or social institutions, but in the realm of the imagination.
- Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Puritan Imagination*

In order to provide a historical reading of specific factors that have contributed largely to our contemporary notions of individualism and self-fashioning insofar as they relate to freedom and the American Dream, it seems fit to read the narrative of the Dream, if somewhat reductively, from a chronological perspective, beginning with the early American settlers and the spiritual 'climate' of their time. Starting here, we can survey the trajectory of the Dream from religious, economic (and with these two, implicitly political) and, ultimately, cultural perspectives, with the ideas of reinvention and self-fashioning as perpetually present constituents of the Dream.

For the Massachusetts Puritans (Calvinists by decent) and other reformists, America not only symbolized freedom and the possibility to pursue certain moral, social, and spiritual convictions. As a screen for the projection of mythic narratives upon which they based their faith and organized their lives, America, 'the Promised Land', actually embodied these things: it was the location where one was 'truly free', and thus obliged, to do what was morally and spiritually correct. Typological readings of the early colonies illustrate the extent to which the settlers identified America as the Holy Land, and their being there literally as a return to the Garden of Eden and deliverance into God's country.[230] Though this type of self-fashioning as a response to scriptural tradition is in at

(Sacvan[230] For typological readings, see Bercovitch, ed. p. 7).*Typology and Early American Literature*; Brumm, *American Thought and Religious Typology*; Jones, *O Strange New World*; and the works of Perry Miller.

least one way fundamentally different from that of today, they are both firmly rooted in the idea of reform: "This faith in reform became the central legacy of American Protestantism and the cornerstone of what became the American Dream. Things - religious and otherwise - could be different."[231]

Perhaps the best way to contextualize the development of the American Dream as a core cultural narrative is in relationship to the idea and role of freedom as its central component. For early colonial America, freedom had an entirely different significance from the ways in which we generally think of it today. Far from implying any indulgence of personal desire, freedom was perceived as a condition that held a direct correlation to social (via spiritual) responsibility: "Freedom involved a willing surrender to the will of the Lord, a choice to defer to Godly clerical and civil authorities that ruled in His name."[232] Jim Cullen quotes John Winthrop (Massachusetts Bay founder and Puritan leader) as stating that true freedom "is maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority."[233] In additional reference to self-fashioning as dependant on the social Other as opposed to ego injunctions, Margo Todd states that "the self was to be formed by an outward focus on the word of the Other…"[234] This statement was made in reference to how the Puritans fashioned personal identity through narrative - that of the bible - through "'hearing, reading, meditating and conferring…'" Thus, 'external' narratives are 'internalized' or incorporated for self-identification and re-externalized for a public display which places the identifier's identity in the social setting, making it functional within a symbolic context. Todd points out that Puritan self-fashioning "was conditioned by scriptural authority and models," thus the identification was with the "fundamentally communal."[235] With the Puritan idea of freedom, we see a clear contrast from a freedom which enjoins one to act according to injunctions of the ego. This early Puritan idea of freedom is much closer to precisely what Lacan has in mind when he speaks of the desire of the big Other, adherence to which bounds one to the *social* symbolic, and which should be thought of along with the ethical maxim *don't give up on your desire* - this

[231] Cullen, *The American Dream*, p. 15.
[232] Cullen, p. 21.
[233] Cullen, p. 21.
[234] Bremer, *Puritanism*, pp. 73.
[235] Ibid.

being something the Puritans would have expressly identified with insofar as one's own desire aligns itself (albeit unconsciously) with the desire of the Other (God).

Nevertheless, from relatively early on, exactly who or what, or more specifically, which spiritual authority was to be the channel whereby authority found its expression was not always clear. With religious settlements as varied as the Baptists, Dutch Reformed, Moravians, Presbyterians, and Quakers, among others, one would be hard pressed to find another region of this size that was so religiously pluralistic at the time.[236] In addition to this, there was a rather large divergence in ideologies of settlement between the South and the North, with the settlement of Virginia growing up primarily around the cash crop of tobacco, and the trade of enslaved Africans accounting for the production of wealth both as a direct result of trade and as a result of production through slave-labor.

Although the Massachusetts Puritans were reformists, they still believed that the Church of England might find its way back to virtue, and (purportedly) therefore had not cut themselves off entirely from the Church. Alternatively, William Bradford and the Pilgrims at Mayflower (1620) had already fully established their position as separatists, and they would indeed not be alone in the separatist spirit. Like Bradford and his Pilgrims, the Quakers had also radically distanced themselves from the Anglican Church at an early date (in America ca. 1655). In 1644, Puritan 'purist' Roger Williams laid the foundations for the Baptist Church in America by moving his congregation and followers to Rhode Island, removing himself from the Massachusetts Puritans. In the meanwhile, Antinomianism had already begun to set in motion the irreparable splintering of the Puritan community at Massachusetts Bay. Advocates such as John Cotton and (perhaps most importantly) Anne Hutchinson stressed the import of an active faith, piety, and moral rigor at the level of the individual, laying stress on adherence to the individual's own conscious (as opposed to an external - implicitly corruptible - embodiment of authority) insofar as it was faithfully guided by these elements. Thus, with the Antinomian crisis of the 1630s, individualism,[237] which would find a purer expression some one hundred and fifty years later with the American Revolution, and again in the

[236] It should, on the other hand, not be overlooked that, with the exception of Maryland, the original thirteen colonies were settled by Protestants. Though, again, the protestant 'movement' was by no means homogeneous.
[237] Coined in the 1835 English translation of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

1800s with Emerson and the Transcendentalists, had already taken root and, in the spirit of reformation, begun to spread.

From the mid 1760s to the mid 1770s, with the resistance to the Stamp Act (1765) and Coercive Acts (1774), the Publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776), the Declaration of Independence (1776), and the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), the ideologies of liberty, freedom and independence were fortified. Still, the concepts of liberty and independence were formed on a reactionary platform and implied independence from a corrupt and unjust entity; and inherent to the idea of freedom was still an application of what was 'right' and 'good' in a social and moral context. Liberty and freedom were not thought of as boundless; rather, there was a strong social and moral dimension to these concepts. With the Transcendentalist movement of the mid-1800s, 'individualism' begins to take a more radical turn toward self-sufficiency, encouraging a possible view of the individual as an entity independent of the social context: "Society is good when it does not violate me; but best when it is likest to solitude."[238] Still, the spiritual and moral dimensions of the Transcendentalist movement are evident throughout the period. It would not be until the 1950s, with the explosion of the concepts of home ownership, consumer empowerment, and financial 'independence' for the 'average' American family, that we see a clear break in the concepts of freedom and independence from what they had represented for the previous three hundred years, with the focus shifting from an individual's freedom to partake in social responsibilities, to the individual's freedom as it pertained to his or her own desires; or, to put it another way, freedom to partake in civic responsibility vs. freedom from civic responsibility.[239] Contributing largely to the possibility of this shift is the historical trajectory of the Protestant (work) ethic and the development of a capitalist economy in America.

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[238] Emerson, "The Transcendentalist." A lecture read at the Masonic Temple, Boston, January 1842.

[239] One could, though, argue that traces of this can be found in the spiritual tendencies of both Antinomianism and Transcendentalism. Nevertheless, these movements are centered on a sense of spiritual morality, and thus always implicitly hinge on the social insofar as both morality and spirituality concern themselves with the manner in which the individual behaves in relation to a social context. Even if this means a radical divorcing of the individual from the social, the impulse and subsequent action is based in the individual's relation to the social. What will follow with consumer empowerment and independence has neither an explicitly moral nor a spiritual (generally) aspect to it, and this is where we see the radical split in individualism.

Because of the utilitarian justification of wealth - that one should not be idle, but rather is obliged to apply one's God-given gifts (find one's 'calling'), and thereby contribute to the social well being - the Protestant ethos came to embody the "gospel of wealth" as it was preached practically from the founding of the English colonies and onward by the likes of Cotton Mather and, later, Benjamin Franklin. Franklin is a key figure in representing the transformation of the work ethic from a theological ethos to a more secularized utilitarian ethos. As an individual of high profile, his various writings, perhaps the best known of which concerning utilitarian ethics would come to be *Poor Richard's Almanac*, eventually epitomized a secularized American work ethic and "Americanized proverbial wisdom concerning frugality, thrift, [and] industry."[240] Separated by the Revolutionary War and a century of relative national prosperity, his direct ideological heirs (in terms of secularized industriousness) were people such as Andrew Carnegie, in whom one can identify the Protestant characteristic of industry for the benefit of the common good in his philanthropy, and John D. Rockefeller, as well as less philanthropic industrial giants who flourished in the era between the Civil War and the turn of the century. In the collection of articles that was published in 1900 as *The Gospel of Wealth*, Carnegie's own "references to Christianity are sparing and sometimes ironical."[241] With industrial growth booming (which cooled during WWI and revitalized incredibly from 1920-30) and Protestant values becoming ever more secularized (recall Coolidge's "the man who builds a factory builds a temple"), ideas about individualism and freedom had begun to take on new significance.

In the Roaring Twenties, a dramatic increase in large corporations, a burgeoning stock market, a massive surge in industrial productivity, and the proliferation of consumer products allowed and encouraged more and more people to find satisfaction in leisure and consumption. Thus consumer power and, along with it, the idea of consumer freedom became increasingly associated with personal freedom and living well (as opposed to luxuries being accessible strictly to the wealthy). By this time we can clearly see two vital sociological developments: first, the shift from freedom and living *right* as

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[240] Jones, *O Strange New World*, p. 206. See also Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

[241] Jones, p. 217. Also, despite the fact that Carnegie, Rockefeller, and various other turn of the century industrial giants often had a philanthropic side to them that was widely visible to the public, over forty percent of the wealth in the United States was concentrated in the top one percent of households.

at once intractably connected to spiritual, moral, and social responsibility, to freedom and living *well* as bound up in one's consumer power (one's ability or 'freedom' to partake of leisure and the accumulation of consumer goods). Along with this came the formation and expansion of a middle class, which was effectively created by the shift toward consumer ideology. The consumption of (luxury) goods, which had, for the better part of the 18th and 19th century, been a privilege enjoyed exclusively by the ruling classes and independently wealthy, was now being made available to the average worker, who was, in turn, often working to produce these goods (directly or indirectly). Recall, for example, Henry Ford's statement that he would produce and sell cars at a price that a worker in his factory would be able to afford on the wages he paid them. In the early 1900s, the mass production of the industrial era was not being fed to a void (or back to native Europe and England, as the fur and tobacco trade once had been), but rather back to itself: that is, it reproduced the conditions of production, which, to a great extent, was the production of the middle class itself, along with middle class values, and middle class dreams, which would increasingly define what we recognize as the American Dream. This is one factor, the rise of consumer culture (a flourishing capitalism), that I would focus on in terms of what it will later mean to reinvent oneself and in terms of what ideologies gain currency as American dreams and become guiding principles, for it is with the idea of consumer empowerment that the dream of reinvention becomes, in theory, accessible to everyone.

Here, we might loosely define consumer culture as "cultures in which mass consumption and production both fuel the economy and shape perceptions, values, desires, and constructions of personal identity."[242] In terms of the manipulation of perception and the construction of identity through suggestion, identification, and performance, the advertising industry quickly became a key component:

> The rise of national 'brand name' products added a new dynamic to consumer culture. During the early 1900s, merchandisers began promoting brand names in order to gain leverage in marketing and distributing their wares. By the 1920s, much of this promotional work had passed to advertising agencies. Using dramatic graphics and carefully honed copy to associate brand name products with desirable personality traits and social values, advertising agencies became social arbiters of style and taste. Some historians suggest that brand names, national

[242] Margaret Finnegan, *The Oxford Companion to United States History*, Boyer, Paul S. (ed.), p.158.

> advertising campaigns, the movies, and, by the 1930s, chain stores and radio led to a homogenization of American culture.[243]

Though we recognize that this 'homogenization' can only be true to a rather limited extent, we should be aware of the condition such influence fosters: consumerism as a basis for identity. As advertising and the media became and become more refined, so too do their ability to include various target markets not initially included in this 'homogenization', or what was then thought of as the consumer majority. Thus, consumerism recognizes the flaw in any idea of homogenization, and accounts for it by offering widely varied groups a basis for identity. In the end, the homogenization that we encounter is simply one of which we could say, *identities are also based in consumerism and consumer ideologies* (you are, in fact, what you eat), despite variations in ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual preference, economic background, and so forth.[244] Though the preceding *also* comprise identity (are also factors for and locations of interpellation), a blanket homogeny is properly found in our collective subjectivity under the hegemony of consumer ideologies. This is not a subjectivity easily objectified, as we find ourselves so properly *within* the ideology of consumerism, that we can not speak or think of it with much or any distance; that is, it is an equation we are always fully within. We might liken this position to the Hegelian notion of *Volksreligion*, from which a people have no distance to their religion and beliefs, but where their lives are organized (not around, but) from within these beliefs, and all of the automatic rituals of daily life are unquestioningly enacted, unconsciously nourishing their structure of beliefs (which *in fact constituted* the social fabric).

Another industry that has contributed largely to the production and development of the American Dream, and continues to do so, is the dream factory itself: the film industry. John Springer notes: "It is an obvious understatement that Hollywood has played an important role in twentieth-century American culture. Hollywood itself, as much as the

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[243] Horowitz, Daniel, *The Oxford Companion to United States History*, Boyer, Paul S. (ed.), p. 159.
[244] This is not to detract from the idea that identities are also based in performance. These do not preclude one another, but rather compliment one another. If I 'adopt' a characteristic that is suggested to me (*I'm a beer lover!*), I fortify this adoption performatively.

films it produces, has been a central component of our national mythology, a complex, multivalent cultural symbol."[245] "Hollywood frequently evoked the sense of a culmination…the conclusion of a journey toward national identity, either the fulfillment or the betrayal of the American dream."[246] I mention this here because Hollywood and the film industry, though it was already relatively popular, saw an immense increase in turnout during the twenties: from an estimated 40 million viewers per week in 1922 to some 90 million in 1930. The film industry was quickly becoming a massive culture producing mechanism. It is also during this time (1926) that sound was introduced into the motion picture. During this period, we can already see a relatively developed 'cult of personality', in which stars of the silver screen are, in effect, worshiped and emulated, and the idea of stardom has drawn droves of people, from aspiring actors to foreign stars to naïve dreamers, to California ever since. There are many things about Hollywood that epitomize the American Dream. People come to this place of fantasies from everywhere looking for a new beginning, seeking fame and fortune, seeking meaning in their lives, looking to reinvent themselves in the land of reinvention and assumed identity. And where more fitting a location for the dream factory to be situated than the west-most coast of the continental United States? With westward expansion's ideological injunction to "go west, and grow up with the land" (always associated with opportunity and renewal), and the idea of instant wealth that has been associated with the state since the gold rush, no place has embodied the cultural component of reinvention like California has.[247]

It is precisely this component (reinvention) that makes Hollywood the ultimate topographical and ideological expression of the American Dream, which perpetually reiterates the injunction to 'follow your dreams'. This is not to say that it is the founding

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[245] *Hollywood Fictions*, pp. 3.
[246] Springer, pp. 5-6.
[247] In regard to the idea of instant wealth and success, Cullen states, "[o]ne of the greatest ironies - perhaps *the* greatest - of the American Dream is that its foundations were laid by people who specifically rejected a belief that they *did* have control over their destinies. In its broadest sense, you might say that the narrative arc [of the American Dream] begins with people who denied their efforts could affect their fates, moves through successors who later declared independence to get that chance, to heirs who elaborate a gospel of self-help promising they could shape their fates with effort, and ends with people who long to achieve dreams without having to make any effort at all" (pp. 10). Kevin Starr also suggests that after the Gold Rush, "California would never lose its symbolic connection with an intensified pursuit of human happiness" (*Americans and the California Dream*, pp. 68).

location of the injunction, but rather that it 'brings home' the injunction, in a manner of speaking. It does this in different ways. First, we can consider the ways in which the movie industry creates narratives that have a socio-cultural impact. This massive narrative-producing machine continually provides the opportunity for individuals to seek out and engage in narratives that, for one reason or another, they identify with. As we know, the production of narratives, as with the production of any consumer item, both reflects *and* shapes the 'desire' of its target market. Bearing this in mind, I am tempted to say (and will argue) that, more and more, we are seeing narratives enjoining us to adhere to our imaginary fantasies, telling us, as the American Dream tells us, that there is no 'objective' truth (that is, there is no truth in the social body in terms of things we collectively agree on) stronger than what we *personally* or individually consider to be true.[248] Take, for example, the narratives we have considered up to now: artificial being narratives, conspiracy narratives, alien narrative, and further, cataclysm narratives, vampire or ghost narratives, fantasy narratives (Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Star Wars...), thrillers, murder mysteries…or even love stories. Within these cultural fictions we produce and consume, we are repeatedly enjoined to embrace imaginary fantasies insofar as these narratives both reflect and encourage our (unregulated ego-driven) 'desires'. Though this is, on the other hand, not exactly to say that this is a (social) 'mistake' *per se*. In addition to this often being precisely how entertainment functions (reflecting fantasy), there is also the necessity of engaging in imaginary narratives, a concept we will return to in the conclusion. I would argue, though, that the cultural condition of adhering to fantasy (as reflected though the narratives we produce) and the consequences that follow - a breakdown in symbolic relations and fictions - can be found all along thought the trajectory of the American Dream, right from the beginning, right from the phantasmatic idea that the settlers felt themselves to actually be arriving back in the garden of Eden, that they were truly entering the promise land. This adherence to spiritual utopias (phantastic by nature) aims from the very beginning at an ardent adherence to the imaginary, and has as an inverted correlate (within 'imaginary'

[248] Thus, the shift from a longing for freedom to do what is socially and morally correct to a longing for freedom from social and moral constraints is equally reflected here. We might also view the reification of the serial murderer's phantasies - creating his singular truth (and, at the same time, his singular stardom) outside or from with-out of the social collective - as a superlative enactment of the American Dream.

narratives) a narrative type that we might view as the underside or symptom of the Dream: Noir. An irreducible component of Hollywood fiction and fact, Noir is by no means the end of the American Dream, but rather, ultimately, a logical development or manifestation of the Dream.

Mulholland Drive: Noir as Symptom of the American Dream

Another way Hollywood provides impetus for the injunction to follow your dreams (in addition to narratives which mirror this) is in, as already mentioned, its production of celebrity, of the cult of personality, which for the last century has lulled individuals into fantasies of stardom and drawn them to the southern coast of California.[249] Because we are less interested in the incomparably seldom 'success' stories of individuals following their dreams, and rather more interested in the general social realities of (too ardently) adhering to imaginary fantasies, with all its dangers to the individual and to the social fabric, we should turn now to David Lynch, who in 2001 brought us a film so pointedly concerned with the lure of Hollywood, with the mythos of following your dreams and how such a pursuit quite quickly and easily flips over into an ardent adherence to imaginary fantasy, and with the consequences involved in the clash between (individual imaginary) fantasy and (social symbolic) 'reality'. In Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, the Noir tradition is framed as the ever-present 'true' dark underbelly of the American Dream in its ultimate manifestation: Hollywood.

Although David Lynch has been known for his tales that are set in American small towns (particularly *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*), *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* have come to typify the 'dark underbelly' of the 'California Dream' and should be considered patently (Southern) Californian narratives, in so far as we think of California as a phantasmatic landscape and home of the Noir tradition. As we know, Lynch has long been interested in the fantasy's capacity for 'perversion' of symbolic space/exchange. In this sense, he is the quintessential cinematic illustrator of what the American Dream, as it

[249] As Springer points out, Hollywood is "a town that kindles dreams of opportunity, wealth, and fame yet most often produces disappointment, disillusionment, and despair" (pp. 3).

finds its ultimate expression in Hollywood, has come to represent in our time. *Mulholland Drive* is explicit here from step one - or perhaps even earlier:

On a promotional poster for the film, we see a shot of what, if we don't know any better, we presume to be Mulholland Drive looking onto the Hollywood Hills.[250] Above the hills, looming gigantic in the sky are the heads of the two main characters, Betty Elms/Diane Selwyn (Naomi Watts) and Rita/Camilla Rhodes (Laura Elena Harring). At the center of the picture, we see the Hollywood sign sprawling across the hills. The lighting is important here: from the bottom of the picture, the lighting falls on the white divider line of the street, though all around it is dark, including the palms that line the road, and as it moves toward the vanishing point - the Hollywood sign - the contour of which is drawn by the dark trees, the road, including the white line, fades entirely into darkness. Against a relief of hills, the Hollywood sign is well lit in comparison to the rest of the picture, but nonetheless appears to be in a kind of twilight, with the region below it where the road disappears in darkness and the sky above filled with clouds. Looking at the stormy sky (a rarity for the region, we should bear in mind), we realize this is not a night shot of Mulholland Drive, with the street-lamps partially illuminating the drive and the Hollywood sign lit up against the hills and the night sky. Rather, it is a *storm over Hollywood*. What is the narrative of this picture? There is a dimly lit passage leading us to a place: Hollywood. The path there is shroud in darkness, and though "Hollywood" is more clearly lit, the sky above it is ominous and foreboding. The suggestion here is that the narrative follows a dark path toward a phantasmatic or, more precisely, dream landscape. What is the fantasy? It is set against the backdrop of Hollywood, and we can already see that it involves two women. Their heads are floating like a dream above the hills in the phantasmatic ether of Hollywood, the stormy sky suggestively blending into their images.[251]

[250] I am referring here to the Promotional poster circulated for the film's release in Germany and Switzerland, or to the French Promotional poster with the Cannes winner title.

[251] Also worth noting is the film's promotional tagline, quoted from Lynch: "A Love Story In The City Of Dreams" (Internet Movie Database). This narrative, which depicts a fantasy that breaks in on itself when it meets up against the harsh 'reality' of the social symbolic, is a trope for the 'behind the scenes', or noirish 'reality' of Hollywood.

Plot Synopsis of *Mulholland Drive*[252]

Diane Selwyn is an aspiring actress who comes to Los Angeles from Canada. Back home in Deep River, Ontario, she won a jitterbug contest (this is what we see at the film's opening), which lead to "wanting to act," and when her aunt who had worked in pictures died, she left Diane some money, allowing her to relocate to L.A. She later meets the successful and alluring Camilla on a film set, and Camilla subsequently helps her to get small roles in the films she herself had been cast for. Diane falls madly in love and becomes obsessed with Camilla. When she realizes that not only will Camilla soon marry film director Adam Keshner (Justin Theroux), but also that Camilla has other female lovers, Diane, in a jealous fit of rage (and in pure L.A. Noir tradition) hires a man to kill her.

Back to step one: the film opens with a moving collage of ecstatic dancers doing the Lindy Hop, which, after about a half minute, fades in with applause and images of Diane, who appears to be gleefully receiving the applause and is eventually joined by two elder people we assume to be her parents or grandparents, or perhaps her aunt and uncle. Then, we have a blurred image. When it comes into focus, we are in the first person perspective and see a sheet and pillow before us. We fall toward the pillow while it moves slightly in and out of focus. Fade to black. Here we have the suggestion that we are about to enter a dream, and thus what is strictly a phantasmatic narrative. From the very beginning, Lynch demarcates 'dream time' from 'real time' in the film by showing us the pillow scene, in which Diane 'falls asleep' (or rather, falls unconscious) and enters her phantasy as Betty Elms, and then having her wake up in the same bed at the cowboy's (Lafayette Montgomery) prompting. The first thing we witness in 'dream time' is the car accident Rita - Camilla's 'dream time' incarnation - is involved in, which acts as the point of departure for the fantasy romance between Betty and Rita.

Primarily an expansive dream/fantasy sequence, the film is not linearly narrated (not that we expect it to be). We come to find out that the traumatic car 'accident' Rita is

[252] As the plot is not a traditionally linear one, but rather attempts to mimic the characteristics of a dream-like narrative, employing a visual component for abstracts associations and wish fulfillments, it is sometimes difficult to decode. It is for this reason that I provide a synopsis, which should facilitate a further decoding of individual scenes and motifs.

involved in at the beginning of the dream sequence is a trope for the location of Diane's traumatic encounter, an engagement party, which is first narrated toward the end of the film, and also for Diane's own suicide: the hysterical screaming issuing from the two cars as they approach the limousine just before the crash mirroring Diane's screaming and the two old people's hysterical laughter as she flees them just before shooting herself in the head; the gun drawn on Rita - who is now in the same position (in the back of the car on Mulholland Drive) Diane will be toward the end of the film when she is brought to the traumatic scene of the engagement party - foreshadowing the gun Diane will use on herself *and* foreshadowing/suggesting Diane's hiring someone to murder Camilla; the explosion at the point of impact between the two cars sounding like the explosion of the gunshot when Diane shoots herself at the end of the film, and so forth. Toward the end of the film, when we are presented with the scene of Diane's traumatic encounter, in which she must publicly witness the marriage announcement of the object of her desire (Camilla Rhodes, Rita's 'real' identity) and director Adam Kesher, who she feels has stolen Camilla away from her, we realize that nearly all of the characters we encounter throughout the dream sequence are present at the party.[253] This further suggests that this engagement party, the wedding announcement, is a *real* traumatic encounter, and her dream, which chronologically should be placed after the wedding announcement, can be read as a (re)construction phantasy of the course of events as she would like them to be (that is, according to her fantasy, and, at the same time, as she is able to make sense of them), using the material present at the traumatic scene, and fitting it into the register of her desire, as opposed to the unreadable traumatic encounter. During the narration of the traumatic encounter, we come more fully to realize that the identities we have encountered throughout the film up till this point are phantasmatic identity constructions, as we also elsewhere come more fully to realize what is at stake in this 'dream' narrative by mapping the 'actual' conditions (those from waking sequences as opposed to dream/fantasy sequences), as far as we can determine what they are, of Diane's life back

[253] The party scene is introduced as a 'moment of exposure', of narrative clarification: the opening to the scene at the table in which Diane explains the history and terms of her relationship to Camilla is introduced by a drum roll; a blurred camera shot of the scene suddenly snapping out of obscurity and into focus as the drum roll ends, as if to suggest, 'here is the grand finale, now I am now going to unwind the trick', providing us with a key to the narrative.

onto her fantasy.[254] Thus, we have two parallel narratives: the one of what 'really' happened, and the one that spins through Diane's head as she looses consciousness, perhaps from a bullet wound. The first one is relatively simple: a small town girl comes to Hollywood with dreams of stardom.[255] She struggles, doesn't quite make it, falls in love, is rejected, goes mad with jealousy, has her lover murdered, goes still more mad, and shoots herself. The phantasmatic dream narrative is somewhat more complex.

Once again, back to step one: Rita, Camilla's alter identity in Diane's fantasy, is riding in the back of a limousine with two drivers whom she presumably doesn't know, but who have been hired to take her somewhere. When the car slows to a halt on Mulholland Drive, presumably in the same place it will stop to let Diane out for the engagement party toward the end of the film, Rita utters the same words spoken later by Diane: "What are you doing? We don't stop here." The statement takes on a poetic resonance when it is repeated as we realize that we are witnessing the traumatic, uprooting scene that will initiate an epistemological reorganization. Diane is about to be deprived of her obsession, of the object of her desire, of the organizing principle in the order of her (new) life in Hollywood. No, we don't stop here. We mustn't, because this encounter with the real is where all meaning buckles in on itself and breaks down. This fantasy scene picks up the suggestive thread from a waking scene we will later see that takes place at Winkie's diner, where Diane hires someone to kill Camilla. Between this scene - in which we get suggestive correspondences for Rita's attempted murder, for the blue key, and for the money in Rita's purse[256] - and the engagement party, we are provided with several clues for restarting the narrative, and teasing out the threads of Diane's fantasy.

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[254] Though I do favor a reading of the film in which one lets certain elements float in relative ambiguity and which doesn't attempt to entirely re-arrange the narrative into linearity (this would in any case be a misreading), there are several clues as to how we can identify fantasy/dream scenarios and waking scenarios; for example, the types of cups used, the shape of the blue key, certain types of lamps, and ringing phones are all encoded to suggest that we are either inside or outside of the dream sequence, in addition to the more explicit element of the first person view falling into the pillow near the film's opening.

[255] As she tells Rita in her fantasy, "I'd rather be known as a great actress than a movie star. But, you know, sometimes people end up being both. So, that is, I guess you'd say, sort of why I came here. I'm sorry, I'm just so excited to be here. I mean, I just came here from Deep River Ontario, and now I'm in this [pause] dream place."

[256] The correspondences are the hiring of the hit man, the blue key he tells Diane she will find, and the purse full of money she has brought as payment.

'Desire', Identity, and the Status of Knowledge in *Mulholland Drive*

It'll be just like in the movies. We'll pretend to be someone else.
- Betty in *Mulholland Drive*

When the hired killer tells Diane that she will find a blue key to signal that Camilla is dead when the job is done, she asks, "What does it open?" in response to which the hit man laughs knowingly, though without directly divulging anything. We should read this scene against the one from *Lost Highway* in which Fred Madison (Bill Pullman) attends a party with his wife, Renee (Patricia Arquette), and meets the Mystery Man (Robert Blake). The Mystery Man insists that they have met before, and informs Madison that he is at his house at that very moment, despite his standing before him at the party. He gives Madison a telephone and insists that he call his home as proof. When the Mystery Man answers Madison's home phone, and Madison asks, "how'd you get inside my house?" he answers, "you invited me. It is not my custom to go where I am not wanted." Madison then asks, "who are you?" and the Mystery Man standing in front of him lets out a sinister, knowing laugh. As the film progresses, we come to realize that the Mystery Man represents a symptom of Fred Madison's desire or 'conscience' to kill; being 'in his house' functioning as a trope for being in his head. As Martha Nochimson suggests: "The intimation is that Fred and the Mystery Man are aspects of the same person, a new Lynchian representation of that place in the subconscious dominated by frightening elements of ourselves."[257] He appears first at this party, after which the Madisons go home, and Fred thoroughly dismembers his wife. He appears again later in the film just as Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty) transforms back into Fred, shortly before Fred will kill Dick Laurent.[258] After Fred witnesses his wife leaving the hotel where she had had sex

[257] *The Passion of David Lynch*, pp. 213.
[258] Much of what precedes this scene has to be read, as in *Mulholland Drive*, within the register of the phantasmatic, here demarcated by Madison's transformation into and out of the young and virile Pete Dayton, who, as it at first appears, is entrusted into Mr. Eddy's (the fantasy persona of Dick Laurent) inner circle of trusted people, is desired by Alice (the fantasy persona of his wife, Renee Madison), is able to satisfy her, and has agency. We witness a 'breaking' point, when Pete realizes that he has been duped by Alice, and he transforms back into Fred. Or, as Žižek states, "one should absolutely insist that we are dealing with a real story (of the impotent husband, etc.) that, at some point (that of the slaughter of Renee), shifts into psychotic hallucination in which the hero reconstructs the parameters of the Oedipal triangle that again make him potent - significantly, Pete turns back into Fred, i.e., we return to reality, precisely when,

with Dick, Fred breaks into Dick's room and forces him at gun point to get into the trunk of his car. They then drive out into a secluded area, and when Fred opens the trunk, Dick jumps out and they struggle on the ground. The Mystery Man suddenly appears and hands Fred a knife, with which he cuts Dick's throat. Shortly after, Mystery Man shoots Dick in the head as he is lying on the ground, and whispers something to Fred.[259] There is a close up of Fred listening to what he is saying, and when the camera pans out again, we see that there is no Mystery Man, that Fred is alone, holding the proverbial smoking gun (which he then suggestively tucks into his trousers). As with his initial appearance, when Fred kills, the killing is accompanied by the presence of the Mystery Man. He appears at traumatic moments when we are about to witness the 'externalization' or realization of a psychotic episode: murder. Murder here is a dualistic psychotic episode in that it is an 'un-castrated (inter)action': a moment of explosive jouissance where the 'lack' of a third, 'regulatory' term results in the disappearance of *lack* in the chain of signification, which equals death (depicted here in a literal manner). Thus this mysterious *other* is by no means a representative of Other desire, but rather of an unbearable knowledge, that which the individual cannot allow him/herself to be conscious of, that which will destroy him/her. This sinister and knowing laugh, then, which appears in both films, functions as a sign for or indicator of this unbearable knowledge. In *Mulholland Drive*, it is exactly this laugh that Diane receives when she asks the hit man what the blue key opens.

What does the blue key open? It opens a blue box. Or, it opens to Camilla's death (in the dream sequence, Rita disappears, of course, precisely when the blue box *is* opened), and also to a new status in Diane: not only a new social status, 'murderer', but to a new psychological status - a new status in knowledge, which the individual cannot bear, cannot but break under the weight of. The peripatetic scene in Club Silencio concerns itself precisely with knowledge insofar as the performance in Silencio is about nothing other than disillusionment. In this scene, Rebekah Del Rio (her real name, which incidentally mirrors Betty, who is also 'of the river' - Deep River, Ontario - and who is also 'crying over' unrequited love) sings a Spanish version of Roy Orbison's "Crying," a

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within the space of psychotic hallucination, the impossibility of the relationship reasserts itself, when the blond Patricia Arquette (Alice) tells her young lover, 'You'll never have me!'" (Žižek, *The Art of the Rediculous Sublime*. Pp. 15).

[259] Suggestively, right after Dick says to Fred, "you and me mister, we can really out ugly them som-bitches."

song about unrequited love. As Georg Seesslen points out, the scene when Del Rio breaks down is one in which Betty and Rita are "witnesses to disillusionment." We might say that the disillusionment here is the removal of the idea that there exists anything but illusions - as the moderator in Silencio (Richard Green) says, "it's all an illusion." It is in this scene that Betty finds she is 'in possession' of the blue box.[260] It is also here that she seems to be taken possession of, or to be temporarily possessed (she uncontrollably shakes in her seat just before discovering the box in her purse) - she undergoes some sort of trauma/change - and it is at this scene that narrative, along with Diane's fantasy, collapses suddenly inward (again, "it's all an illusion") and circles back to the 'beginning' from which the narrative must be reinterpreted. Thus, from within the 'dreamtime' narrative, from within Diane's fantasy, the blue box should be read as an 'externalization' (a visualization) of some secret, narrative-imploding, 'internal' and unbearable knowledge. It should be thought of in relation to the disappearance of Rita, but also to the two old people who emerge from it in the end and whose unbearable presence drives Diane, outside dreamtime, to shoot herself. We might say that they act as a type of inversion of the Mystery Man in *Lost Highway*: where the Mystery Man appears as a symptom of Fred Madison's desire or 'conscience' to kill, the two old people appear (the third time) as a result of Diane's having killed; that is, as her 'bad conscience', with which she cannot live. As Seesslen suggests, when we see them as the couple Betty meets by chance on her flight to Los Angeles, their 'knowing' laughter from the back of the limousine is foreboding and already indicates that something is amiss. Though we should recall that we also see them at the very beginning of the film, framed as the parents, or something similar, of Diane. This further supports a reading of them as some sort of 'agency of conscientiousness', a source of super-ego injunctions intent on guiding the subject within the social symbolic.

In this regard, we might read the film from a strictly moralistic perspective: the knowledge one carries of oneself as a murderer ultimately returns to destroy you.[261] This unbearable knowledge being precisely what drives the individual to a thorough psychosis,

[260] Or as Seesslen calls it, the Identitätskästchen.
[261] We might also read the film as morally confronting the culture of Hollywood and the dream factory: "Wenn man will, kann man MULHOLLAND DRIVE durchaus auch als ein morality in der Stadt der Träume ansehen" (Seesslen, pp. 220).

to a projection of themselves thoroughly reworked as a phantasmatic construct in which they assumed new identities, assign others new identities, and redefine the terms of their relationships as unmediated by the third term of the Other - that is, a phantasmatic projection in which castration is subverted.[262] As these are narratives decidedly concerned with the status of knowledge - that is, self knowledge, what the individual both hides and exposes to her/himself, about her/himself - it might also be helpful here to read 'knowledge' in these films through the lens of Lacan's two types of knowledge: *savoir* and *connaissance*. *Savoir* is the "knowledge of the subject's relation to the symbolic order, and also that relation itself… Symbolic knowledge is knowledge of the truth about one's unconscious desire."[263] It is this mode of knowledge that integrated the subject into the symbolic; or, to put it another way, that ushers the individual into subjectivity. Insofar as it consists of "the truth about one's unconscious desire," it is the (unconscious) knowledge of Other desire which the subject continually gravitates toward. *Connaissance*, on the other hand, consists of a necessary misrecognition in which the individual 'acquires' "an illusory kind of self-knowledge based on a fantasy of self-mastery and unity."[264] It is this mode of knowledge that is inherent to the formation of the ego. Thus, we have two modes of knowledge: one based in the symbolic register (*savoir*), and one based in the imaginary (*connaissance*). As Evans points out, "Imaginary knowledge is an obstacle which hinders the subject's [the individual's] access to symbolic knowledge." In this regard, it is the job of psychoanalysis to "continually subvert the subject's imaginary self-knowledge in order to reveal the symbolic self-knowledge which it blocks." [265]

Although *connaissance* is necessary for the establishment of the ego, and the ego, in turn, is necessary for the subject to establish an understanding of the world around him, a continual breaching in adherence to the illusion of self-knowledge, in which illusory 'ego-desire' (imaginary desire, and in this regard phantasmatic as opposed to actual Other

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[262] As Seesslen suggests, this self-reflexive turn to fantasy is symptomatic here in individuals who have no future: "Dass es das lineare Erzählen, die lineare Entwicklung eines Charakters nicht mehr gibt, sondern nur diesen erstaunlichen Einbruch in die eigene Traumwelt, ist nur auf den ersten Blick faszinierend ungewohnt, befreiend und in seinen Zyklen selbstreflexiven Anreicherns ungeheür tiefgründig. Es ist vor allem eine Vision eines Menschen, der nicht eigentlich 'Zukunft' hat" (pp. 207)
[263] Evans, pp. 94.
[264] Evans, pp. 94-5.
[265] Evans, pp. 95.

desire) is replaced by unconscious Other desire, is essential for the subject to enter into and maintain its position within the social fabric.[266]

The Lynch films discussed here are moralistic insofar as they paint a pejorative portrait of the consequences of an unchecked engagement in *connaissance* and a lack of *savoir*. In *Mulholland Drive*, this happens at two levels. Murder, to begin with: The initial commentary on *connaissance* is that the "fantasy of self-mastery and unity," an imaginary knowledge, can lead the individual to commit acts that rupture the symbolic (trauma), and, like a vacuum, suck them out of it. Where Diane is not satisfied with the actual conditions in the social fabric - she may not singularly possess her (in any case obscure) object of desire - she takes it upon herself to send a shockwave through the symbolic universe they find themselves within: she has Camilla murdered. In this regard, the problem is one based precisely in a fantasy of unity and self-mastery. The exposure of this fantasy, however, drives her to adhere more ardently to a different fantasy of self-mastery (this is the injunction of the American Dream; this is where Noir as a direct symptom of the American Dream injunction becomes evident[267]). As a result, we enter into the next level of *connaissance*: due to this overly ardent adherence to a false knowledge, which results in actions that have real consequences both in and for the symbolic and imaginary (murder/death), the individual has shifted itself into a condition in which it must carry a secret and thoroughly unbearable knowledge of its actions (repression). With the status of this knowledge as unbearable, the subject constructs yet another fantasy world of self-mastery and unity (another level of *connaissance*: Diane's 'dream') with which to repress the unbearable knowledge buried inside her. As a model of the unconscious, *Mulholland Drive* shows us the progression of such a fantasy; how, as it develops, repressed knowledge ruptures the fabric of fantasy (like a breach by the real) until the unbearable is once again exposed (as/through symptom) and utterly destroys the subject. Thus, we have an initial *connaissance* which leads the individual to perform a deed, the impulse to which is rooted in the imaginary. We have a secondary, reactionary

[266] This is precisely what psychoanalysis concerns itself with: the exposure of the Other's desire, which the analysand unconsciously moves toward, is encouraged toward, through a process of association.
[267] The point here is that certain knowledge (knowledge of the past) must not be exposed, which is precisely the point, within the Noir tradition, of the sun being turned into an image of horror under which everything is exposed. This idea that one's history should either disappear or be non-binding is central to reinvention and, thus, the American Dream.

connaissance through which the individual represses knowledge of this deed. *Mulholland Drive* is moralistic in that it continually has its finger on the missing *savior*: this 'lifestyle' ultimately expresses itself as corruption of the social fabric. It says that the injunction to follow one's dreams, to recreate oneself, with its implication that access to identity is always at hand, according to one's own will (ego injunctions), is based in a specific type of knowledge: *connaissance* - a stance I am trying to support. And it points to the somewhat ironic condition that such a pursuit of identity through *connaissance* is, ultimately, the corruption of identity.[268]

It's strange to be calling yourself.[269]

When trying to find out Rita's identity, Rita and Betty are led to a dead woman. This splits out into varied suggestive directions. First, that they are looking for 'Rita', and that this is her supposed apartment suggests the death of Rita, and is thus reflexive of Camilla's murder. But we will also later recognize that this is Diane's apartment, and thus deduce that it is Diane's rotting corpse we see lying on the bed. This, though, does not necessarily mean we must choose one interpretation over the other: they both work. After a manner, this is a 'conclusive' scene, and contains a kernel around which the narrative is constructed: this corpse is a mirroring (of which there are several) between Betty and Rita. It is important to clarify that the mirroring takes place between Betty and Rita, and not between Diane and Camilla. Betty and Rita are, according to how we are inclined/encouraged to read the overall narrative, *Traumfiguren* (dream-characters) of Diane's, based on herself and on Camilla; and, importantly, based in her fantasy of the relationship they share.[270] This crossover of the dead bodies of Diane and Camilla at the site of Diane's fantasy suggests the status of their 'actual' relationship: they are interchangeable because Diane's relation to Camilla is strictly imaginary, which becomes explicit in Diane's need to kill Camilla when Camilla will not adhere to Diane's fantasy -

[268] In an interview about the film, Lynch states that the character's in the narrative are "…all dealing with somewhat of a question of identity. Like everybody, you know."
[269] Rita in *Mulholland Drive*.
[270] One could also render a reading of *Mulholland Drive* in which Diane/Betty and Camilla/Rita are Doppelgängers, with Camilla/Rita as Diane/Betty's phantasmatic 'incarnation'; and thus the love relation portrayed here becomes a narrative of narcissism.

she may not exist otherwise; and, as we will later see, neither can Diane function outside of her own fantasy (she has no access to the symbolic). Their relationship, the trajectory of this narrative, is a trope for 'Hollywood' (and the American Dream) insofar as it embodies the dream of self-reified 'phantasies' that ultimately degenerate into a poverty of social despair (failed subjectivity), and in this, *Mulholland Drive* places itself at the heart of the Noir tradition. As Seesslen suggests, "Es ist, als hätten alle Bilder des film noir hier ihren Ursprung. Als ging von hier eine dunkle Verführung noch für die unschuldigsten Seelen aus."[271] This is precisely the trajectory Diane - a 'most innocent soul' - follows on her journey into show business, into the murky seduction of Hollywood.

In looking at Noir as a symptom of the American Dream, we want to think of Noir/the Dream on a parallel of two specific terms: the condition of bearing a secret knowledge that, when exposed to daylight, will destroy the subject (Noir); and the condition that an adherence to ego injunctions is culturally preferable, that by 'following your dreams' you can achieve a desired social status (the American Dream). We might think of the 'secret knowledge' as the individual's fantasy, and 'daylight' as the social symbolic (this is, loosely put, the structure in *Mulholland Drive*), whereby the exposure of a strictly adhered to fantasy into the social symbolic destroys the 'subject' (symbolized by the death that must take place at the end of the narrative within the Noir tradition). My stance here is that the American *Dream* is inherently imaginary. The Noir tradition, at one extremity, comments on the clash between individual fantasy and symbolic space, that when we try to give body to our imaginary phantasms in symbolic space things tend to go horribly wrong.[272] This is precisely what we see in *Mulholland Drive*, "a love story in the city of dreams." The film suggests how Hollywood, our cultural engagement with Hollywood (the city of dreams, where everything is possible), is based in the over-determination of the imaginary. In Lacanian analysis, this equals psychosis and the death of the subject. This *is* noir.

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[271] Seesslen, 210.

[272] An earlier work that brings the ideas here together in a manner still entirely accurate and meaningful is Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (first published in 1939).

Denarration, Renarration: The Legacy of the American Dream

And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.
- F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

One of the tasks of the Noir narrative is the depiction of how what you have left behind comes back to haunt you. Tourneur's *Out of the Past*, for example, illustrates precisely this. At the film's opening, we are in the small town of Bridgeport, California, where Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) has recently arrived, opened a gas station, and fallen in love with the local sweetheart, Ann Miller (Virginia Huston). The opening of the narrative is constructed around the mystery of Jeff's past: though he has rather quickly integrated himself into the small town, nobody knows anything about his past, a point which quickly becomes a topic for discussion. The only person who appears as if he could fall within the realm of trusted knowledge concerning who Jeff is, is his assistant, Jimmy (Richard Webb), who is, of course, a mute. Then one day, an old business associate shows up 'out of the past', and informs Jeff that his former employer, racketeer Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas), wants to see him. Jeff decides to reveal his identity and his personal history to Ann, out of love for her. While they drive to Whit's house in Lake Tahoe, he explains that he had worked as a private detective under the name of Jeff Markham, that on his last case he was hired to find Sterling's mistress, who had shot Sterling and stolen $40,000 from him, that he (Jeff) fell in love with her as soon as they met, that there was a murder involved, and that she had subsequently left him. When Jeff arrives in Tahoe, he is blackmailed into another job, as Sterling has false evidence stating that Jeff had murdered his former partner, Jack Fisher (Steve Brodie), when in fact it had been Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer), Sterling's mistress, and who Jeff had fallen in love with. During this final job, Jeff eventually realizes it is a setup, and that he is the fall guy, though he is able to turn the tables and bring Sterling to an agreement in which he would reveal Kathie as Fisher's actual murderer. To keep herself in the clear, Kathie shoots Sterling (again) and tries to convince Jeff that they are meant for one another and that they should leave the country together. Jeff pretends to agree, but as they are leaving the Sterling house, he secretly calls the police and informs them of the murder just

committed. When they get out onto the road and Kathie sees the police roadblock, she shoots Jeff, the police shoot her, and the car crashes. Thus Jeff's past literally returns to claim him.

Film Noir's claim that one cannot escape one's past always has as its premise the condition of an individual trying to reinvent her- or himself (the past is generally framed as a dark secret one tries to escape): it encompasses the idea that you can pick up, move west (usually), and 'start again'. It is precisely this element, I would argue, this element of reinvention, that links the Noir tradition to the American Dream. Here we should recall Cullen's statement that "[a]t the core of many American Dreams…is an insistence that history doesn't matter, that the future matters far more than the past."[273] Viewed as a phantasmatic landscape, we might thus think of America as the land of forgetfulness.[274] Though we must also admit that *as* phantasmatic landscape, or, rather, where fantasy is concerned, one can never entirely forget. That is, it is precisely phantoms of the past that return to constitute the unlit folds or crevices in the phantasmatic landscape. What we continually witness throughout the Noir tradition is an attempt to reinvent, to forget, and despite an attempt to forget, despite the attempt to wipe away the past (though at the same time precisely because of this), the suppressed past returns with a vengeance. It is the suppression of what one does not want to come to light (to come to consciousness), the material that inhabits the unlit folds of the phantasmatic landscape, that provides the basis for the sun as an image of horror within the Noir genre. The sun here functions as a symbol for a specific and ever-present threat: the threat of exposing just what one is trying to forget. This repressed material that one unsuccessfully attempts to jettison in the process of reinvention faithfully returns to its source. In fact, we should argue that, as repressed material, it never actually leaves.

What is certainly the most anthologized and probably the most widely recognized narrative on the American Dream insofar as it implies self-reinvention ending in tragedy is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (which, not incidentally, encompasses many of the key elements of the Noir genre). The young Jay Gatsby, born Jimmy Gatz, falls in love with Daisy Miller while in the military and wants to marry her; though he is faced

[273] Pp 184.
[274] Here we might also recall the earlier discussion of the matrix in *The Matrix* films as having no memory or being bound within imaginary parameters.

with the harsh reality of the partition in socio-economic classes that keeps them ultimately divided. Determined to win her over, Gatsby reinvents himself: through bootlegging and other illegitimate means, he amasses a fortune, and with this money he assumes a new identity, a new history ("an Oggsford man"), and attempts to achieve a certain social status by buying a large house in Long Island, where he perpetually throws extravagant parties. The story's trajectory aims at his endeavor, and subsequent failure, to win Daisy over from her husband, Tom Buchanan.

Though Gatsby might, on the one hand, be perceived as living/embodying the American Dream in that he is able to move up the economic ladder, able to surround himself with 'socialites', and able to claim for himself a new public identity, his money and his social engagements nevertheless do not provide him access to the closed community to which people like Tom and Daisy belong; and when we read Gatsby, we read his death as the inevitable consequence for attempting to subvert these strict social stratifications. What is such a consequence if not a return of the past, as we also saw with Tourneur? Such narratives make the claim that, despite one's efforts at renewal and reinvention, one cannot avoid one's past. And implicit to this claim is the idea that one's past is precisely one's self, and one's self is something one cannot be rid of.

In this vein, we can recall Paul Varjak's (George Peppard) accusation of Holly Golightly (Audrey Hepburn) in Blake Edward's adaptation of Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*:

> You know what's wrong with you miss whoever you are? You're chicken. You've got no guts. You're afraid to stick out your chin and say, 'okay, life's a fact. People do fall in love. People do belong to each other. Because that's the only chance anybody's got for real happiness.' You call yourself a free spirit, a wild thing. And you're afraid somebody's gonna stick you in a cage. Well baby, you're already in that cage. You built it yourself. And it's not bounded in the West by Tulip, Texas or in the East by Somali-land; it's wherever you go. Because no matter where you run you just end up running into yourself.

The accusation is leveled at her tendency to flee the symbolic fictions that would cling to her, in a continual search for something 'better'. Though Edward's adaptation is, on the whole, more optimistic than Capote's original narrative, what we witness in both is an individual who is haunted by a past (and present) she is trying to escape. Holly Golightly (hystrionically) reinvents herself, continually trying to escape romantic relations with

men, though at the same time claiming that this is precisely what she is in search of (a rich husband). We come to learn that she first appeared 'out of nowhere', as it were, with her brother, and was taken in (wed) by an animal doctor from a provincial town in the south, acting as wife and mother to him and his children. She then leaves him and goes to Hollywood, apparently with the intention of getting into show business. She is again taken in, this time by an agent. He supports her and sends her to language classes in order to get rid of what he claims to have been an indecipherable accent.[275] Once she is ready for her first audition, she abandons Hollywood for New York. Her claim is that she had never been to New York before, and that is why she left Hollywood. Again, this should be read as a running from binding situations/relations that would ground her in a manner whereby she would have to take responsibility in 'being there', and through which she would be determined/defined as an individual, as a subject. We might say she flees the communities that would interpellate her. In this respect, she rebuffs subjectivity, she rebuffs a traditional process of identity production.[276] As her agent says: "She's a phony, but she's a real phony." In other words, she is constantly 'playing' at identity. Though processes of identity production are also legitimately interpreted as performative - one answers the call of interpellation, and does so by assuming the corresponding role (mother, mentor, friend, worker…) - the difference we should delineate here is that Holly does not simply perform identity as a response to the interpellative institutions/bodies around her. She performs identity through a perpetual process of shedding these institutions and bodies (and thus identities), temporarily assuming a new self. Thus, the claim that she is a 'real' phony is a claim that her phoniness is precisely what she consists of. At the end of the film, Paul makes the counter claim that this continual shedding of identities is in itself merely an attempt to avoid herself (see above quote). What does this mean?

On the one hand, we might interpret this in terms of her past returning to claim her. While in New York, first her agent comes to bring her back to Hollywood, then her

[275] This should be reminiscent of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, in which also hinges on a plot of and commentary on reinvention.
[276] *Pygmalion* makes a similar claim, from the opposite end: when Eliza Doolittle is reinvented, she fully engages the interpellative communities constituting her symbolic network. In the end, we see that this, consequently, is precisely what one cannot walk away from or neglect, but rather precisely where basic identificatory components find their roots.

husband comes to bring her back 'home', both of which moves 'back' she successfully avoids. Thus, if we read one's past as that which constitutes one's person, Paul's claim, "no matter where you run you just end up running into yourself," takes a literal form: bodies from her 'past lives' continually reappear in the present. On the other hand, we might read his claim in terms of her tendency to flee from these bodies. The focus, then, does not fall on their return - the 'self' she continually runs into being her past - but on her habit of fleeing symbolic relations/fictions. Thus the self she 'runs into' would be defined by this tendency to flee symbolic fictions. Though this is precisely what Paul is afraid of, that this characteristic of her performance will continue to dominate, and thus he will also lose her. We might alternately read Paul's claim as follows: "no matter where you run, you just end up running into symbolic fictions." Such a claim concedes that the symbolic relations you engage in constitute 'your self'. Thus his statement is aimed at exposing to her the fact that she will never be able to 'escape' symbolic relations/fictions, that she will continually run into them, despite her performance of continually fleeing them. Implicit here is the idea that sustained symbolic relations are the only functional mode of identity production, and that her continual rebuffing of symbolic relations can only lead to, or already constitutes, a crisis in identity. This idea is equally implied in the taxi scene where Holly attempts to refuse commitment to Paul and deny that her love for him is binding. When she states, "I'm not Holly. I'm not Lou Lou May either. I don't know who I am!" this is as much as to say: "Yes, I love you as Holly, and therefore I must not be Holly." Her denial of love for Paul is constitutive of a denial of identity. We might say she refuses him the privileged location of a primary interpellator. We might say that this narrative is chiefly 'about' rebuffing interpellation. Such a reading would not exclude a feminist reading in which Holly's character might be interpreted as both mirroring masculine desire (fantasy) and ultimately refusing to adhere to the codes imposed through masculine desire. In framing 'woman' as a phantasmatic male projection, Holly only has recourse to a limited set of identity performances, though at the same time she refuses to accept her status as 'screen' for these phantasies by perpetually shedding these identity performances.[277]

[277] For a thorough discussion of 'woman' as phantasmatic male projection ('screen'), of identity performance, and of "the vulnerability of identity" as they are all closely and symptomatically bound up in hysteria, see Elisabeth Bronfen's *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents.*

Woody Allen's *Zelig* presents a similar type of identity performance, in which there is a constant 'cycling' of identities. Though where we would read Holly Golightly either as rebuffing interpellation and symbolic relations or as hysterical rebellion against (though necessarily within) masculine fantasy, Allen's Zelig (equally hysterical, but not rebellious) randomly enacts identity by assuming the identity traits of the people he comes in contact with.

The film itself assumes a position of 'cloaking identity'. It is a fiction purporting to be a documentary, applying the tools and assuming the traits of a documentary. It opens with video footage of a tickertape parade through the streets of 1920s New York, cut with contemporary footage of Susan Sontag, who comments on Leonard Zelig (played by Allen) as a cultural phenomenon: "He was the phenomenon of the Twenties. When you think that, at that time, he was as well known as Lindbergh it's really quite astonishing." The psuedo-documentary recounts the life of public figure Zelig, who, after being brought to the hospital and astounding doctors with his ability to instantly metamorphose, assuming the physical and character traits of those around him, is internationally celebrated as an oddity. When he is first brought to the hospital in New York, he is treated by doctor Eudora Fletcher (Mia Farrow), who exhibits his condition to visiting specialists: "With the doctors watching, Zelig becomes a perfect psychiatrist. When two Frenchmen are brought in, Zelig assumes their characters, and speaks reasonable French. In the company of a Chinese person, he begins to develop oriental features." We learn that after a series of treatments, being removed from the hospital and exploited by his half sister and her dubious fiancé, and disappearing in Europe, Zelig is returned to the care of Eudora Fletcher, with whom he falls in love and who ultimately cures him.

In "The Dissolution of the Self in *Zelig*," Richard Feldstein comments on the significance of the way in which Zelig is celebrated in the film: "Explaining this red-carpet treatment, John Morton Blum, historian and author of the fictitious book *Interpreting Zelig*, notes that the American public found in him a 'symbol of possibility, of self-improvement, of self fulfillment.'" Interpreting this element of and quote from the film, Feldstein states that "Americans throw accolades at Zelig because he mirrors their desire to escape from obsessions that bind them to predictable behavioral patterns… By being the quintessential symbol of adaptability, Zelig helps to perpetuate the notion that

the American dream is achievable."[278] In discussing this element of adaptability and reinvention, and its particular connection to the American Dream, Feldstein has recourse to a statement made by Lacan in his lecture on "The Freudian Thing." He localizes Lacan's position on this cultural "desire for transformation" by reference to "a cultural ahistoricism particular to the United States of America."[279] Lacan states: "It is this ahistoricism that defines the assimilation required if one is to be recognized in the society constituted by that culture."[280] This cultural ahistoricism celebrated in Allen's pseudo-documentary is the same cultural phenomenon we are concerned with here.

To claim that the American Dream is based in a cultural tendency toward ahistoricism is not to claim, as Europeans are so often accused of doing, that the United States *has* no history. This idea of being 'against' history should rather be understood through the tendency toward reinvention, and, within this tendency toward reinvention, the tendency for one to try to break away from one's own historicity. Let me state this again: this is not a tendency toward *cultural ahistoricism* ('the United States has no cultural history'), but a *cultural tendency* toward ahistoricism (the tendency toward ahistoricism at the individual level as one of many cultural constituents). Here we should take note of what Patrick O'Donnell says about paranoia as it relates to a cultural tendency toward ahistoricism in relation to rewriting identity: "paranoia…is not a condition or a collection of symptoms (though we will treat it symptomatically) but a *narrative process* by means of which an individual constructs a historical or cultural identity."[281]

Although the past twenty-five years have been witness to an invigoration of a celebratory approach to cultural fragmentation in the United State (a phenomenon that has gone neither unnoticed nor unencouraged by corporate America), in which the view on America as cultural melting pot has shifted to cultural 'salad bowl' where one can take pride in and identify with one's cultural (particularly ethnic) 'roots', this element of ahistoricism is still prevalent in the tradition of reinvention. This element of reinvention, with its roots in the Dream, in the actual intentions of the earliest American settlers,

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[278] In *Perspectives on Woody Allen*, pp 75.
[279] *Ecrits*, pp 115.
[280] Ibid.
[281] *Latent Destinies*, pp. 20.

which surfaces in the Noir tradition as a futile and fantasy-driven attempt to escape one's past has a correlate in what has contemporarily been called "denarration."

Generation X: Symbolic Suicide and Ciphers

The term 'denarration' comes from Douglas Coupland's book *Polaroids from the Dead*:

> It has been said that as animals, one factor that sets us apart from all other animals is that our lives need to be stories, narratives, and that when our stories vanish, that is when we feel lost, dangerous, out of controle and susceptible to the forces of randomness. It is the process whereby one loses one's life story: "denarration."[282]

We should note that although much critical interpretation (rightly) picks up this notion of denarration in relation to an ever-increasing digital existence (see Baudrillard in any case and the various articles in computer-culture related magazines, most notably Wired), this is most poignantly noted in the book *Microserfs*, and less so in others like *Polaroids*, *Generation X*, *Shampoo Planet*, and *Life after God*. Though what is regularly present is Coupland's attention to this story-less-ness (denarration) overall. If we consider *Microserfs*, this tendency toward denarration is clearly couched in the social phenomenon of assumed identities in cyberspace and the 'decorporalization' of personalities through electronic media. Though if we consider *Generation X*, for example, we have something closer to the cultural disillusionment we witness in *Fight Club*, as a reaction to which the characters reject the social codes, customs, and institutions foisted upon them through 'the establishment'. With chapter titles like "I AM NOT A TARGET MARKET," "QUIT YOUR JOB," and "DEAD AT 30 BURIED AT 70," the book is highly skeptical of the culture it inherits at its particular historical period (early 1990s), and thus came to be recognized as capturing the *Zeitgeist* for young adults of this period. *Generation X* is about three friends who decide to 'drop out' of society. Unsatisfied with and disinterested in their jobs, disconnected from their families, at a loss to know how to satisfactorily

[282] Pp 179.

implement their educations, and unwilling to simply plod through life via a series of ritualized/institutionalized engagements (school, work, marriage, kids, consumerism and so forth; recall the bathroom scene from *Fight Club*), the three friends decide to move to the to the California desert in an attempt to "erase all traces of history from my past."[283] Žižek's definition of symbolic suicide is: "an act of 'losing all,' of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the 'zero point,' from that point of absolute freedom called by Hegel 'abstract negativity.'"[284] The attempt at denarration in *Generation X* is precisely such an attempt (realistic or not) to 'lose all', to divorce oneself from institutes of interpellation, and in this regard, it is an attempt at symbolic suicide. This willful act is fundamentally different from the conditions of identity that result from (the anonymity offered by) emersion in digital communities. The 'loose' symbolic communities and symbolic relations (the 'stories') that the three denarrated characters subsequently construct or find themselves within out in the desert are not constituted by the "attempts to create small narratives within the general, digital denarration," as is the case in *Microserfs*.[285] Again, I would point out that they have nothing to do with digital communities. Nevertheless, there is some (unavoidable) attempt to create small narratives. The reason I call these 'loose' symbolic communities and relations is because they are purposely structured with a view toward keeping them relatively non-binding. By avoiding deeply entrenched social rituals of coupling (they live either alone or with friends as opposed to with 'partners') and of capitalist engagement (they do not accumulate possessions and they work 'insignificant' jobs which they can easily leave from one day to the next), two things are achieved: the weight or cultural currency these established institutions carry with them appears to diminish, and through this minimalization, the degree of engagement and responsibility to them is nominal or 'loose'. To put it simply, they create symbolic communities and locations of interpellation one can 'walk away from' with relative ease.[286]

In *Polaroids from the Dead*, as well as much of the rest of his work to date, we find a cultural dis-ease similar to that in *Generation X*. We might propose that Coupland has

[283] *Generation X*, pp 41.
[284] *Enjoy Your Symptom*, pp 43.
[285] Berressem, "Folding."
[286] Precisely what Holly Golightly attempts in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

taken up the task of mapping cultural locations of denarration (as opposed to being considered - falsely - *primarily* concerned with identity in the *digital* communities):

> Up until recently, no matter where or when one was born on earth, one's culture provided one with all the components necessary for the forging of identity. These components included: religion, family, ideology, class strata, a geography, politics and a sense of living within a historic continuum.
>
> Suddenly, around ten years ago, with the deluge of electronic and information media into our lives, these stencils within which we trace our lives began to vanish, almost overnight, particularly on the West Coast. It became possible to be alive yet have no religion, no family connections, no ideology, no sense of class location, no politics and no sense of history. Denarrated.[287]

From the above quote, we can discern some clear parallels between Coupland's notion of the role of cultural locations of 'narration' and the (Althusserian) notion of interpellation, with its primary locations, I have employed here throughout. Religion, family, and class stratum constitute, traditionally, what are probably the three locations of interpellation with the highest cultural currency. Between the notion of interpellation used here, Žižek's definition of symbolic suicide, and Coupland's concept of narration/denarration, we should have a relatively clear idea of what is at stake in Coupland's cultural analysis of the North American West coast. There are some various characteristics to consider here. One possible point of view is that individuals are losing or have lost the connection to the identity-supportive institutions we have most relied on throughout 'modernity'. If the point is not that they have necessarily lost this connection, then it may be that these institution have transformed out of their traditional role into something new. It may be that they have been or are being replaced, and it may be that the modes of identity production/support we are accustomed to have simply become outdated ("How are we to know that people with 'no lives' aren't really on the new frontier of human sentience and perception?").[288] Whatever the case, Coupland's proposition, a proposition I am trying to support, is that these institutions no longer carry the cultural currency they once had.

Polaroids from the Dead is a collection of short stories and essays, both fiction and nonfiction. The first ten chapters are inspired from and set within a series of Grateful Dead concerts in the early 1990s, where part two, "Portraits of People and Places," spans

[287] *Polaroids*, pp. 180.
[288] *Polaroids*, pp. 182.

the globe, drawing on various cultural items - locations, films, paintings, music, events - to create some sort of collage that should transmit an overall impression of a 'cultural climate' of the time. The third section, "Brentwood Notebook," is set primarily within Southern California and comments on various events and people prominent in the media during the first half of the 1990s - events such as Kurt Cobain's suicide and the murder trial of O.J. Simpson as media extravaganza, and people such as Madonna and Princess Diana. Recreating series of short 'culture clips', Coupland creates a portraiture of North American culture that functions as a response to questions opened up by particular events and conditions: Why were we so enthralled with the Simpson/Brown case? What is the cultural legacy of Marilyn Monroe? What will be the consequences of young parents' attempt to preserve youthful whimsy on their own children? What does a stable middle-class lifestyle have to offer? and so forth. In formulating such questions, he brings our attention to the locations where we desire meaning and meaningfulness in 'our' lives (that is, what we lack), how we create this meaning (how we cover up this lack), and to what end (what are the effects of the ways in which we displace the lack)? To put it simply, we may ask, where have our narratives failed us, and how will we rewrite them? Where *Microserfs* locates denarration in relation to digital interaction (a crisis in corporeal interaction), and *Generation X* locates it in relation to a crisis in the established institutions of work, family, and social class, *Polaroids*, though it covers much of the same ground concerning secular institutions in crisis as *Generation X* does, acutely targets an additional location of denarration related to a crisis in spiritualism; a spiritual crisis within secularized America.[289]

> Brentwood generates a mood that arises, possibly, from the difference between what Brentwood posits itself as being (a secular nirvana: better living through sex, money, fame and infrastructure) and what the suburb actually is. One receives the distinct aura of a municipality embodying secularism in crisis. And a part of the crisis of secularity seems to stem from a crisis in our cultural concept of fame, the body - and the way we dream of leading our lives.[290]

[289] This is also what is clearly at stake in his 1994 release, *Life After God*, though *Life* is clearly more personal, ending with the author/narrator's admission that he needs God in his life.
[290] *Polaroids*, pp 148.

Here Coupland points to some of the ways in which communities within the culture attempt to 'cover' an area of need spiritualism (and here I mean organized religion) had tended to; that is, what is exposed are cultural phenomena acting as compensation for organized religion, as a displacement of a lack in spiritualism. The idea here is that through such things as sex, money, fame…one's sense of purpose and one's *raison d' être* are substantiated. Though he proposes here that this attempt at "secular nirvana" is based in cultural concepts that are in any case already in crisis, and thus can only extend these crises into the areas of production (identity) which they are used for as material. Throughout *Polaroids*, Coupland gives various examples of how cultural phenomena flood in to fill the gaps left by the relative dissolution of organized religion as a primary location of interpellation: "Brentwood is also technically the 12-step program capitol of the planet. The University Synagogue…hosts the world's largest weekly Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, with 1,100 attendees. While held within a synagogue, it is important to remember that AA is non-denominational while at the same time accepting of a higher power."[291]

Polaroids, as, foremost, a book of explicit cultural commentary, draws on various non-fictional cultural artifacts and events, and in this regard it renders the crises it addresses not only through a fiction-mirror of the culture, but rather also by drawing out these artifacts and events where they serve to illustrate and expose such crises. There are, though, also fictional parts of the diegesis constructed for the same purpose. In the chapter "HOW CLEAR IS YOUR VISION OF HEAVEN?" Coupland describes a seen from a Grateful Dead concert. It begins with a young mother who prepares her children for the drive back home while the father is still in the concert. As the children are in the van and ready to go, they ask her to tell them a story. Thinking "of the stories her mother told *her*" and thinking "of her world," she tells them a story consisting of what we recognize as a fictionalized version of her own personal theology. It is a fantasy type of tale of a skeleton king that comes to a parched city torn by catastrophe. The skeleton is clearly picked up from the dancing skeleton caricatures common to Deadhead iconography, while the city she describes is clearly San Francisco, home of the band. The

[291] *Polaroids*, pp. 156-7. As it is not necessarily common knowledge, I should probably point out that Brentwood is a wealthy suburb of Los Angeles, well known for being home to the rich and famous.

whole of the story is not very important. What is important is the dream at the center of the tale. The skeleton speaks of a dream, a wish that all inhabitants of this city have that they don't recognize. The skeleton tells the king of the city that their wish, which they don't properly recognize, this wish accompanying the wish for rain, is a wish to be able to have an image of heaven, to have a renewed faith in the afterlife (and thus in God), as these are things that they have lost due to the abundance and well being they had known for so long before the drought, due, in effect, to their modernity. This tale of a dream of heaven and the afterlife is paired with the mother's own sense of spirituality as bound up in certain narratives. Once the children have fallen asleep, she begins to think of her own mother and the stories her mother told her of the 1960s: "And from these tales, Columbia knows that at the heart of the sixties dream lies a core truth, a germ that refuses to die, an essence of purity and love that is open to abuse - and continually abused - but without which Columbia could not live her own life peacefully."[292] Again, we can see how localized or 'private' narratives serve at the location of spiritualism where organized religion no longer does: the "core truth" that is "an essence of purity and love" can be read as right out of the Christian tradition, particularly the tradition as formed by the teachings of Christ, as can the capacity for this 'core truth' to offer Columbia peace in her own life. Is this not what is often at stake in the public use of organized religion? We should call to mind Coupland's statement concerning the replacement of vanishing and vanished narratives, narratives that have lost their cultural currency: "In the event of no narrative at all, fantastic narratives have forever zoomed in to fill the vacuum."[293]

Polaroids is concerned with a general shift in "middle-middle-class life, and how this middle class underwent, and continues to undergo, a profound transformation."[294] Though I am at best skeptical about the middle class' capacity for "profound transformation," Coupland manages to bring forth effective portraitures of middle class values in crisis. Clearly, the idea of a breakdown in the cultural locations of interpellation and the function of interpellation itself might constitute a profound change in and of itself, though this capacity for this type of crisis is something I have been trying to map

[292] Pp. 62.
[293] *Polaroids*, pp. 185.
[294] Introduction to *Polaroids*, pp 2.

out through the cultural history of the United States and the narrative of the American Dream, which, I would propose, encourages crisis in its approach to such institutions, even if it is these very institutions that, at the same time, it promises access to. To put it rather bluntly, the injunction to follow one's dreams, with the implication that access to family, fortune, fame, and the like are simply 'out there' waiting can encourage an adherence to imaginary structures which are threatening to symbolic relations and one's place within the social symbolic - to subjectivity. Where Coupland implies that the currency of our narratives based in our relationship to these long established institutions has diminished or transformed to such a degree that the narratives no longer suffice as the building blocks for identity, he makes the claim that we displace our engagements with such institutions and that we attempt to localize the necessity for identity-building/supportive narratives in *other* places (Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, for example, as a secularized form of spirituality). This, though, is by no means to say that these *other* places will function any better than the old 'narrative places' (institutions of interpellation). It is not to say that the other places are any more regulated by the third term of the Other's desire than the old placed. That is to say, one is not out of danger of adhering to the imaginary, and thus our status as subjects and our symbolic relations are not any better off. In fact, what I hope the narratives we have considered here expose is that our 'abandoning' of our traditional institutions of interpellation as a result of their having 'failed us' (this might be equated to what we perceive as a disappearance of the Other, of Other desire), often opens onto imaginary interaction - a dualistic engagement between the individual and *other* individuals and institutions (and in this regard, phantasmatic engagements). We might delineate the logic of this symptomatic structure thus: long established social institutions appear to lose their interpellative 'potency', which takes on the appearance of a disappearance or a retreat of the Other, a disappearance of Other desire. The logical progression, the symptomatic development, would be that individual action and social interaction proceeds, though unregulated by the third term of the Other's castrative 'No'. The unconscious Other knowledge (or 'No'-ledge) determining the desire and action of the subject transforms into the possibility for constant access to 'objects of desire'. Thus, desire's essential element of sustaining or constantly reproducing itself through distance gives way to a phantastic access to objects

(and institutions) devoid of the structuring principle that lets them function in a symbolic capacity, that provides the adhesive for the social. Suddenly, we are lawless. As Žižek states, "Everything is permitted, you can enjoy everything, *but* deprived of its substance [which Law is constitutive of], which makes it dangerous."[295] It is a circular structure: the seeming disappearance of the Other gives way to a dualistic imaginary interaction with objects/institutions/narratives. This dualistic, unregulated interaction dissolves social symbolic 'space' (expunges the subject and the 'space' the subject occupied), thereby perpetuating a more strictly imaginary interaction.

Bearing all of this in mind, what we want to ask ourselves at this point is, how do we react to such crises? I would read Coupland's explication of denarration, just as I would read the 'renarrative' element central to conspiracy: as illustrative of a condition of crisis in our culturally (and individually) defining narratives, and *not* as a 'solution' or answer to the condition of crisis - that is, they are symptomatic. Recognizing that the traditional institutions of interpellation appear to no longer function as satisfactorily as we have come to expect or believe, we do not move to the desert, leaving everything behind, and wait to see what develops. If our old defining narratives appear to no long function, we cannot simply stop being defined through narratives. *And* we cannot simply choose the narratives that we wish to be defined by. This is precisely what I am arguing is the injunction of the American Dream and what I am arguing is an injunction to adhere to dualistic imaginary structures. Then what do we do?

An alternate reaction to a crisis in the currency of traditionally strong interpellative social institutions - an obverse of denarration/renarration (the adoption of 'new' self-selected narratives) - would be a strict (conservative) adherence to these institutions and their established narratives. We might approach this kind of adherence within the ideological framework of fanaticism, particularly political and religious conservative fanaticism. Thus, if we characterize the narratives and conditions we have discussed up to now as 'liberal' narratives in that they portray a desire for rewriting selves and, following the injunction of the American Dream, 'expose us' as rewriting ourselves (albeit imaginarily, exposing at the same time a crisis in engagement with the social symbolic

[295] *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, pp. 96.

fabric), we can oppose such narratives to conservative fanaticism, which does not allow for the rewriting of narratives. My wager is that such conservative fanaticism equally excludes any possibility for the emergence of (for the recognition of and identification with) Other desire, and thus equally upholds and adheres to, in fact, let's say it *prefers* imaginary structures. Two films that gained much public attention in 2004, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and Niki Caro's *The Whale Rider*, will help to illuminate this point.

Part VI. Conclusions

Jesus versus the Whale Rider

In Niki Caro's *Whale Rider*, a tradition in which (patriarchal) authority has been passed along family lines from father to son and determined by a set of tasks to be fulfilled along with other rites of passage, meets a more contemporary tradition of feminism, which must likewise be 'answered to'. At a diegetic level, what we witness is a son's inability to extend the chiefdom family's masculine lineage. This calls into question the ability for a patriarchal system of social organization's effectiveness, or its ability to continue to function in a meaningful manner. The grandfather, Koro (Rawiri Paratene), represents the quintessential Man/Father who both perceives and fears the disappearance of his kind (representing patriarchy, he is the spiritual leader of a Maori tribe), and is portrayed at times as all too present and overbearing, as well as old fashioned, for the others, who perceive the changing times all around them. His granddaughter, Paikea (Keisha Castle-Hughs) - or "Pai" as she is called through most of the film, who survived her brother (whose destiny, according to lineage, would have been to become chief of the tribe) and who bears the name of their spiritual ancestor and founder - loves her grandfather very much and strongly believes in the tribal tradition. She is, in fact, the only one who (until the critical moment, when the train of authority must properly shift from the old chief to the new) does not begrudge her grandfather his 'old-fashioned' ways, and still less the tribal tradition: "Her tones rang with pride as she recited her genealogy, the family *whakapapa*. She conveyed how grateful she was to live in Whangara and that her main aim in life was to fulfill the wishes of her grandfather and of the tribe."[296]

Paikea answers to the tribe's tradition with complete devotion, as if she intuits the symbolic mandate implicit in her name. This is natural for her. There is nothing disturbing to her concerning her abilities and what she feels is calling her, and the fact that, because she is a female, she is automatically disqualified from the chiefdom lineage doesn't even seem to come within her grasp of reason. In this sense, she is 'post-feminist',

[296] Witi Ihimaera, *The Whale Rider*, pp. 86-87.

having (unconsciously) digested and fully integrated what is a stake in feminism's concern for a rewriting of patterns/locations of authority. I will argue that it is precisely in this regard that the young girl's desire aligns itself with the shifting desire of the (social) big Other. In order to talk about the 'shifting desire' of the big Other in relation to what I have labeled 'liberal narratives' and 'conservative narratives', I would like to borrow some ideas from Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

In *Contingency*, Rorty develops a theory of social progress in which, through a sense of human solidarity based in the recognition that all of the conditions in our lives are contingent by nature, we might diminish suffering and cruelty by being less alienated from one another. He suggests that solidarity not be thought of "as a recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation - the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'" (pp. 192). At the center of this theory is a person he calls the "liberal ironist." Here he employs the term 'liberal' to indicate "people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do," and 'ironist' to indicate "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs and desires" (pp. xv). It is this sense of contingency in relation to something Rorty calls our "final vocabularies" that will help us form a picture of the 'shifting desire' of the social big Other.

> All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person's 'final vocabulary'.[297]

Such a 'final vocabulary' might be thought of in terms of an individual's 'thought-system' and the spectrum through which their perception takes shape and which guides (or acts as the impetus for) their 'expression' in the broadest possible sense. In this regard, we can link this 'vocabulary' back to Lacan's wall of language as something that shapes the

[297] Pp. 73.

thoughts of the individual and serves as the 'medium' through which the individual communicates as 'subject' within society. What is accentuated in Rorty's theory here is the idea that final vocabularies are constitutive of one's beliefs and inseparable from the individual's worldview. He argues, though, that "all vocabularies, even those which contain the words we take most seriously, the ones most essential to our self-descriptions - are human creations," (pp. 53) and thus contingent by nature, as opposed to something based in an 'objective truth' that is 'out there' beyond the conditions of our lives. What distinguishes the ironist from other types of people is that s/he is "aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves" (pp. 74). Due to this awareness, the ironist "(1) has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself" (pp. 73).

I would propose that it is this type of sensitivity to 'other vocabularies' and to the instability of one's own vocabulary that allows one to be sensitive to the 'shifting desire' of the social big Other. It should be clear enough by now that I am employing Lacan's term 'big Other' in order to indicate a locus of desire that requires something of the subject within society. Thus the desire of the 'social big Other' encompasses the loci that rupture the social fabric, calling our attention to them and demanding that we reevaluate and re-arrange our perceptions and worldviews, that we call into question our own final vocabularies. To say that there is a 'shifting desire' of the social big Other is simply to admit that our histories are in fact contingencies and that the social fabric in which we all partake is in continual flux, that our own experiences and our interactions with one another generate new questions and new possibilities. In order to 'identify with' the desire of the social big Other we must recognize the ultimate contingency of our final vocabularies (the contingency of language) and be willing to integrate other languages into our own. Also, I would stick to my borrowing of Lacan's theory of subjectivity and desire here: if the individual is to become a subject within the social fabric, the individual

must identify (unconsciously) with the Other's desire. Thus, if we are to take part as a social *subject*, we must be ironists, we must come to be in the location of subjectivity by allowing our vocabularies to remain in a state of *perpetual becoming*; or to put it another way, *wo es war, soll ich werden*.

Narratives like *Whale Rider* and *The Passion* are of interest to us in the terms I am outlining here precisely because they address the question of the shifting desire of the Other and our relation to such desire, even if they offer different takes on the desire of the Other. Still employing Rorty's rhetoric, we could say that the narrative *Whale Rider* is concerned with the contingency of final vocabularies.

When we consider Koro, the grandfather/patriarch/spiritual leader, he believes he is adhering to the desire of the big Other by following imperatives as set down long ago and fortified through tradition. He realizes the importance of defining narratives, but he is strictly conservative in his approach. This does not strike us as surprising or terribly off key as he is simply moving in accord with the rules his tradition has laid out for him and that have determined his symbolic capacity within the social fabric. His stance is rather logical in its own right. Still we recognize he is in opposition to the desire of the social big Other in the narrative. His intentions are not at all malign, nor does the narrative at any point suggest this. Rather, he finds himself at a historical moment in which the desire of the big Other is not precisely the same desire it had been for his ancestors. As social bodies develop in their ideologies, so does Other desire. Unfortunately for Koro, he does not know how to integrate, nor does he want to, the changes around him. In this regard, he does not recognize the contingency of his own final vocabulary. He is not an ironist. There is one scene in which all that is at stake in the narrative is encapsulated and is worth quoting at length:

> Paikea: "at school we gotta do a speech on where we come from and that. [Pause] So anyway, you know how we all came on the whale?"
> Koro is repairing an outboard boat motor.
> Koro: "That's right."
> Paikea sits down on top of the workbench on which the motor is mounted, and Koro removes the cover of the motor.
> Paikea: "But where did the whale come from?"
> Koro pulls the ripcord on the engine and nothing happens.
> Koro: "From Hawaiki."
> Paikea: "Where's that?"

Koro: "It's where we lived before we came here. It's where the ancestors are."
Koro is fingering the motor the whole time, trying to get it running.
Paikea: "So Paikea came from there."
Koro: "Ae."
Paikea: "How long ago?"
Koro: "Long time."
Koro takes a piece of twined cord and begins to wrap it around the spindle of the flywheel.
Paikea: "But how long?"
Koro takes one end of the cord and hands it to Paikea.
Koro: "See that there? Look at it closely. What do you see?"
Paikea: "Lots of little bits of rope, all twisted together."
Koro: "That's right… Weave together the threads of Paikea so that our line remains strong. Each one of those threads is one of your ancestors. All joined together and strong, all the way back to that whale of yours."

Koro takes the cord again and, pulling it to spin the flywheel of the engine in hopes of starting it (a trope for his lineage 'running' or 'functioning'), breaks it. Then he throws it down and says, "useless bloody rope, I'll get another one." We want to keep our attention on his metaphor of the rope as the sum of their ancestors. As he goes into the shed to find another piece of rope, Pai picks up the broken rope, ties it back together, and, with ease, starts the engine. She calls to her grandfather: "Paka! Paka! It's working! It's working!" Koro walks over to her, turns off the engine, and says, "I don't want you to do that again. It's dangerous." Pai looks at him somewhat confused as he walks away. The metaphors at work here are pretty straightforward. Paikea is the medium through which the ancients and the ancestral tradition can be passed down to the current generation. She is the one who can 'tie the knot' that will bind her people back together again, so to speak, and keep the ancestral tradition running into the future. As we mentioned earlier, this is nothing she questions. Her impulse is to fix what appears to be broken - or, to engage a lack - and her reaction when it works is celebratory, a reaction she expects others will experience as well, and when her grandfather is displeased, she is confused. When Koro responds by saying that what she has done is dangerous, the implicit meaning is that it is dangerous for Paikea, as a girl, to assume or even begin to consider assuming the role implicit in her namesake. We must then ask, where does the danger lie?

The danger lies in her threat to tradition. Tradition dictates that the chiefdom is passed down along bloodlines from one generation to the next to the firstborn male. In her case, the firstborn male would have been her twin brother, who died at birth along with her mother. She, perhaps out of spite or despair on her father's part, inherited the

name of the original chief of the tribe (Paikea), but in order for her to do so, her mother and the firstborn male had to die. We might say that in order for a woman to inherit the tradition of the chiefdom, mothers and firstborn males, as imbued with their symbolic capacity, have to die. But it is precisely thus that the tribes ancestry and tradition may live on. To put it another way, something of the tradition is sacrificed in order for the tradition to retain its currency and live on. Certain elements of tradition, patriarchy, and the rigidity of tradition itself are sacrificed in order for the spiritual leader to emerge. This is where Paikea acts in accord with the desire of the big Other, she represents this sacrifice. And so does Koro.

Koro's adherence to the big Other's desire coincides with his own only after a series of trying encounters (failing relations with his entire family), failed undertakings (to find a boy in the tribe who can fulfill the tasks that designate a chief), and revelations (Pai is the true inheritress of Paikea, she is the Whale Rider). What we witness here is the (re)production of subjectivity:[298] An epic journey wherein which we face various (splintered) ideological 'beasts' who we must battle and discard or integrate as they are socially useful (according to Other desire) - i.e. who we either 'take home', or leave behind in our travels. This is what Koro's trials consist of. Thus, with Pai and with Koro we see two 'paths' to the Other's desire (and thus to subjectivity): one which the subject appears to be *origin*ally imbued with Other desire (Pai originally and unconsciously identifies with the desire of the Other), and one in which the subject must desperately struggle through a series of profound events after which he himself subsequently happens to arrive at the desire of the Other (Koro). In this regard, we might say that the film exposes the necessity in reformulating our final vocabularies. Koro approaches his final vocabulary as a truth he contains within himself which is not based in contingency. Pai embodies the contingency Koro is in denial of; she represents an other final vocabulary. Ultimately, for Koro to remain within subjectivity, in order to respond to the needs of his community - that is, in order to respond to the shifting desire of the social Other - he must recognize the contingency of his own final vocabulary and become an ironist.

[298] I suggest 'reproduction' here because Koro is in a position of subjectivity when the narrative begins. He is defined by and a defining factor among his community. Though as we move along the trajectory of the narrative, he becomes increasingly misplaced in his social context, and his symbolic currency becomes destabilized. It becomes clear that a change is required, and that if this change is not made, if he doesn't 'reproduce' himself in the position of subject, he will die (symbolically).

Against this, we should read Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, which depicts Jesus' temptation by Satan in the garden at Gethsemane, his betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, and rebirth according to the four Gospels. We should read the film, though, not so much in terms of its diegetic content as in terms of the social gesture of the film. The diegesis of the film appears in most respects to remain true to the diegesis of the Gospels, and in this regard is not particularly of interest, as these narratives have been in wide circulation for quite some time.[299] That the film, whose currency mainly (though not exclusively) lies with the (lay) choir it preaches to, so to speak, has suddenly rekindled the potency of the Gospels for believers (marginal and otherwise), points, more than anything, to the poverty of the contemporary imagination and the absolute superiority of the visual motion media over the written or oral tradition.[300] However, the social gesture of the film is of interest to us. We might read it in the same way we read Koro's ethical stance within the diegesis of most of *The Whale Rider*.

Koro realizes the social importance of, or let's say he *lives fully within*, defining (symbolic) narratives. That is, he has digested the social/communal magnitude of identifying with the desire of the big Other - of engaging one's symbolic mandates. Though, as we have seen, his wish and intention to identify with the desire of the big Other (as most clearly dictated by tradition) has become so prominently conscious (that is, has moved into the realm of fantasy), that he has become 'insensitive' to the desire of the big Other, and in this sense, his strict adherence to certain imperatives in traditional symbolic narratives/mandates isolates him toward imaginary space. This condition is commented on in a scene where Pai talks with her father (Cliff Curtis) about her relationship to her grandfather:

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[299] Whereas a film like Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on the Nikos Kazantzakis book, is, despite Judas' Brookland accent, interesting precisely because of its speculative qualities as opposed to an attempt at non-interpretation.

[300] With 'imagination' here, we should be clear that this is separate from the Lacanian imaginary and from the notion of fantasy. Where fantasy is a projection of (internal) fears and desires inherent in the imaginary register, imagination, here, should designate the individual's capacity to process, in this case, a written (symbolic) narrative from without into symbolic forms or images as they can be integrated into that individual's internal imaginary landscape. That is to say in a rather simplified manner, phantasies have a interior → exterior trajectory, while imagination, as I am using it here (the capacity to embellish or flesh out an external narrative and thus bring it into the individual's symbolic/imaginary understanding) has an exterior → interior trajectory.

> Paikea: "Why doesn't he want me?"
> Porourangi: "Oh Pai, it's not you. It's not even about you in a way. He's just looking for something that doesn't exist anymore."
> Paikea: "A new leader, they exist."
> Porourangi: "Yeah, they do. Except, I think, it's become even more than that. In his head, Koro needs a profit."
> Paikea: "What's that?"
> Porourangi: "Well, somebody whose gonna lead our people out of the darkness, and who'll make everything alright again. Only problem is you can't just decide who those people are just because you want them to be, eh?"

In strictly adhering to tradition, Koro subsequently denies the 'real' conditions of his social surroundings.[301] Thus, he is *looking for something that doesn't exist anymore*. This something is the desire of the big Other, which may have ceased to exist for Koro in a certain capacity, though, as Paikea points out, he simply errs here: "A new leader, they exist." The problem, as succinctly put forth by Porourangi, is that "you can't just decide who those people are just because you want them to be;" i.e. based on your fantasies. That is, the individual cannot determine what the desire of the big Other is to be, even if it is based in a tradition of Other desire. We recognize that Koro's intentions are good: he longs to uphold symbolic relations based in Other desire. The most obvious place to 'identify' this desire is in tradition. What the film illustrates is that with changing social conditions (Maori tribal culture as 'compromised' by westernization; or, tradition of patriarchy having to come to terms with feminist consequences), so changes the desire of the big Other. And again, while this comes as natural to Paikea because she grows up within it as a synthesis of tradition and change, Koro struggles to keep his defining narratives alive, and in so doing errs in his sensitivity to the shifting desire of the big Other. This is precisely the social role of the Gibson film, or of Gibson himself, though I would prefer to talk about the film's gesture rather than the intentions of the director.

We might view *The Passion* as a response to (fear of) the 'missing Other'. That is, it functions as a defense of a set of beliefs that have long been subject to social critique and no longer retain currency as *the* privileged politically/socially imposed ideology or set of ideologies. As we see with Koro, who simply errs, this does not mean that the Other is

[301] One of the major subtexts of the film is the struggle between dying cultural traditions and westernization.

actually missing, but rather that the individual is dislocated from the Other's desire because it is elsewhere. If we frame the narratives that 'speak a crisis' in relation to the 'missing Other' as asking "my Other, my Other, why hast thou forsaken me?," *The Passion*'s assumed task is to state that the Other has not forsaken us. Paradoxically, its social use, which the director has indicated as the prime impetus behind the making of the film, offers two solutions: Christianity is the true location of Other desire (of the symbolic), and our attention need only be brought to this fact (despite that we do not ever 'forget' Christianity); or, Christianity must be defended as the true location of Other desire because certain conditions of contemporary society threaten its status. It is, though, in this second possibility, which is the only considerable option of the two, that the paradox of the film's gesture makes itself evident. Yes, it attempts to tell us that the big Other has not forsaken us, though in defending itself against the conditions of contemporary society that threaten its status, it is also telling us that the Other's desire is already elsewhere.[302] The desire of the Other does not reside in traditions which do not integrate other vocabularies. It may reside in long-standing traditions, but when it does, it is because such traditions have integrated other vocabularies (we recognize the validity of same-sex marriages, for example, as opposed to rejecting the institution of marriage as an antiquated tradition). *The Passion* is a narrative that I would designate as conservative because it does not take other vocabularies into consideration and does not consider its own vocabulary as based in contingency. It assumes that its own final vocabulary "approximates the will of God or the nature of man."[303] Where *The Passion* pretends that

[302] As the violence itself in *The Passion* seems to point out, we are 'flogging a dead horse'. The graphic violence, which functions as the film's centerpiece, intends to promote an emotionally charged identification with the narrative (not with the Christ, but with the story of His passion). This type of approach at identification through violence can only function to a very limited extent in comparison, for example, with Kazantzakis' ethical approach, because we do not regard suffering violence and the sacrifice of physical well being as a supernatural feat, where as the temptation to live as a human (the point around which Kazantzakis' interpretation turns), to release the full weight of all humankind's sins and of being a god, and the subsequent refusal of this temptation *is* supernatural (it is literally *super*-human). The point is not that this temptation is not implicit in the story both narratives are based on (the Gospels). It is. The point lies in the focus of precisely where Christ's sacrifice and suffering is directed toward in each film: physical suffering and sacrifice vs. spiritual/emotional suffering and sacrifice. Kazantzakis is ethical here in that it puts forth the question, "do I live as a god? or as a man?" Whereas the Gibson film is not concerned with an ethical choice; it is a question of physical (human!) endurance, which at a certain point has the effect of transforming a man into God. That is, it displays the strength of the will over the physical body as opposed to framing an internal conflict of wills.

[303] Rorty, pp. 61.

there are no new vocabularies to recognize and integrate, *Whale Rider* provides a necessary recontextualization of the question *my Other, why hast thou forsaken me?* and in so doing also happens to manage to relocate itself within the shifting desire of the Other.

Toward Subjectivity

I would like, briefly, to read *Whale Rider*'s gesture of responding to the shifting desire of the Other as it is (or just was) located in feminism along with a scene from Pedro Almodovar's *Hable con Ella*: particularly, the silent short film within the film that functions as a centerpiece and a trope for the whole of the film. In *The Shrinking Lover*, due to an 'experiment gone awry', the male lover in the narrative rapidly transforms from what looks like a 1920s dandy to a little boy to an ultra-diminutive version of himself, now so small that he is transported in his lover's handbag. In the bedroom scene between the woman/scientist and her shrunken lover, the tiny man crawls inside his lover's vagina never to emerge again. This, on one level, should be read as a trope for the disappearance of Man as a 'feminist consequence' - or, as a consequence of the exposure of gender roles as nothing more than a performance. Woman as a symptom returns, in all of its bodily implications, in the massive presence of its actual *incorporation* and devours its 'symptom-source' (man). The film within the film also functions as a trope for Benigno's (the real shrunken, de-masculinized/emasculated lover - played by Javier Cámara) 'disappearing' into the womb of Alicia (Leonor Watling). His impregnation of her (which, granted, remains ambiguous) produces an event of death (as opposed to birth) that will have the consequence of reawakening the 're-feminized' woman, as perverse as this might initially appear. Naturally, she is not re-feminized though an act of rape by any particular man. One might read this stillbirth as demarcating the 'end-space' where, after a traversal of fantasy, certain traditional gender norms *and* certain non-traditional inter-gender characteristics are jettisoned ('die' and are abjected). There are two converging narratives here two follow. In the one, as we know quite well from Almodovar's work in general, we have already traversed the fantasy of 'normative' gender roles and digested

(understood and integrated) the condition of their contingency and fictionality. In the other, Woman here is re-feminized, awoken, through the knowledge/experience that the post-feminist 'harmless' ('benign') man cannot in fact penetrate/impregnate her, that he can only crawl inside of her to disappear forever (as illustrated through *The Shrinking Lover* or Alicia's stillbirth). After framing this 'impasse', the narrative proposes a return to traditionally defining narratives (on gender, in this case), though taking into consideration their contingency. We do not end in a domain of non-masculine and non-feminine (to the contrary, the emasculated 'man' and the masculinized 'woman' die), but rather emerge as new women, re-feminized, and new men, re-masculinized. Or, to put it another way, we must traverse our contemporary phantasmatic spaces to their bitter end (to the death of the individual) and emerge with a transformed sense of sexual difference that is 'ironic', in Rorty's use of the term (aware of its own contingency and open to or not threatened by other vocabularies, such, precisely, as homosexuality), *and* does not simply shrink from its own tradition once it has been exposed as contingent and a fiction. One can read the gesture of *Hable* within Almodovar's œuvre as suggesting that, although we have exploded the traditional normative codes of gender in the name of homosexuality and feminism, the point in doing so is to validate these and not to vitiate heterosexuality as such. Rather, heterosexuality, should find itself, 'ironic' and aware of it's contingency, as one fiction among and in dialogue with other symbolic fictions.

In *Whale Rider*, we witness a return to or rebirth of the spiritual and cultural tradition that defines a folk, though this return is only made after a fantasy of functional patriarchy is exposed as debilitated precisely through its assumption that patriarchy is the only valid form of leadership. The narrative shows a process of shifting vocabularies, illustrating the way in which the desire of the social Other is in continual flux and must be answered to. In this regard, it does not suggest that it is the location that we 'end' at (where we are at the end of a fantasy's traversal) that determines identity and subjectivity as dictated by the desire of the Other (we cannot simply say: "it is there, at that location, that subjectivity lies"), and that we can effectively always unquestioningly return to this location to uphold subjectivity in symbolic fictions (as Koro mistakenly assumes). Rather, a transformation takes place in engaging points of social contention on the way toward subjectivity, wherever it might land (as determined by the social Other's shifting desire),

and the move toward subjectivity is constituted in the traversal of fantasy, in the *movement* from one location toward another, and *not* in the condition of *being* at one specific location (or, as the cliché goes: the journey is the destination).

Narratives such as *Whale Rider* and *Hable con Ella* show us, first, that the desire of the big Other is always with us, though it is a shifting (and thus, as we already know, not directly accessible) desire. They further illustrate the syntax of subjectivity within the structure of the symbolic, and insofar as they are instructive in this capacity, we might read them moralistically: when we are socially responsible - or, when we tell stories that show us what it means to be socially responsible (to answer to the call of subjectivity within social-symbolic fictions) - we do not tell stories that unquestioningly fortify and abide by traditional narratives that don't question their vocabularies and see themselves as non-contingent, as is the case with *The Passion*. The point, as I have suggested, is to 'have dialogue' with other vocabularies. They also make the point that, on the other hand, we do not categorically reject such narratives or tradition in an effort to attain (an always already lost) 'freedom'. They suggest, rather, that we recognize the use of defining narratives and their essential role in subject formation, recognize their indispensability, and at the same time recognize the necessity of continually rethinking them. Defining narratives are thus never simply found and applied, and thus function. 'Freedom' in relation to defining narratives should not be the freedom to simply choose the narratives that please you, as Coupland comments on in his fiction, or as is represented by the proliferation of utopian narratives that frame an unresolved and 'passionate' engagement to imaginary space and fictions. Rather, the kind of freedom we want to promote is a freedom to answer to that (the points of contention) which calls us from within the social fabric, and, again, to enter into dialogue with that which calls:

> [I]t's the symbolic relation which defines the position of the subject as seeing. It is speech, the symbolic relation, which determines the greater or lesser degree of perfection, of completeness, of approximation, of the imaginary. This representation allows us to draw the distinction between…the ideal ego and the ego-ideal. The ego-ideal governs the interplay of relations on which all relations with others depend. And on this relation to others depends the more or less satisfying of the imaginary structuration.[304]

[304] Lacan, *Book I*, pp. 141.

What I have been arguing is that we see a proliferation of narratives that reflect something closer to being governed by the ideal ego, which "is the source of an imaginary projection," "the illusion of unity on which the ego is built," and also "always accompanies the ego, as an ever present *attempt to regain the omnipotence of the preoedipal dual relation*."[305] That is, the narratives which support an adherence to the imaginary do so by supporting such a fantasy of preoedipal dual relations regained. The ego-ideal, on the Other hand, functions as a "guide governing the subject's position in the symbolic order," and functions precisely on an interplay, an exchange of speech.[306] In this regard, the subject must be 'sensitized' to her/his own speech, as well as to the speech of *others*. It is in this regard that the individual has the 'freedom' to choose whether or not to enter into dialogue with others.

This is not far from Rorty's intentions in promoting the 'liberal ironist' as the ideal citizen in a liberal state. The liberal ironist deploys both a "private" final vocabulary "to answer questions like 'What shall I be?' 'What have I become?' 'What have I been?'" *and* a "public" final vocabulary "to answer the question 'What sort of things about what sort of people do I need to notice?'" (pp.143). In favoring fictional narratives which call our attention to these type of questions, our concern is clearly not with the consumption of narratives as a simple act of leisure. As Rorty says of his liberal ironist:

> The closest a liberal ironist can come to reconstructing the standard moral-aesthetic distinction, as it applies to books, is to separate books which supply novel stimuli to action…from those which simply offer relaxation. The former suggest (sometimes straightforwardly and sometimes by insinuation) that one must change one's life (in some major or minor respect). The later do not raise this question; they take one into a world without challenges.[307]

Films such as *Whale Rider* and *Hable con Ella* show us how, in having to traverse narratives which put themselves 'up against' new conditions crucial to the contemporary social fabric - in reworking our traditional narratives, not as we'd like them to be, but according to the societal conditions that face us, such as the consequences and

[305] Evans, pp. 52. Italics mine.
[306] Ibid.
[307] Pp. 143.

implications of politicizing gender, of free-market globalism, of the ever-increasing exportation of western culture and its backlash, and so forth - we find our way toward subjectivity within that very fabric. Thus, we needn't necessarily end up some place 'new', as it were, but we find new ways to make our defining narratives regain their function and validity. Such are the 'books' that *do* take us into a world with challenges, and in so doing help us to better understand that a move toward subjectivity always entails a certain responsibility to the social fabric.

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